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THE FIRST TRAIL;

OR,

THE FOREST FOUNDLING.

BY JAMES L. BOWEN,

AUTHOR OF THE FOLLOWING DIME NOVELS.

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396. THE RED-SKIN'S PLEDGE.

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THE FIRST TRAIL.

CHAPTER I.

THE SCOUT'S FOUNDLING.

"**LOOK** out, Dan; *look out!* You'll hev the hull confounded caboodle of 'em arter us afore ye know it, if ye don't be more *keerful!*"

These words, though whispered, were quite audible to the speaker's companion, creeping beside him. An encampment of Indians, who had been spreading death and desolation through the settlement, lay before the two men.

"I know what I'm about. Nobody need tell *me* how to come it over the reds."

The cracking of a twig beneath Dan Dennison's knee, as they crept toward the bivouac of the savages, was the occasion of the warning.

Ralph Robbins and Dan Dennison were the advance scouts of a party of United States soldiery, who, having nearly overtaken the Sacs and Foxes under Black Hawk, were anxious to surprise and destroy the red villains.

The two resolute and experienced men had no difficulty in surveying the position of the Indians, but, after looking the ground over, were convinced that a surprise was impossible. Two or three men might creep up on each side of the camp, and get within close rifle distance, but for any considerable body to do so was entirely out of the question.

"No way but a quick, sharp charge," said Dennison, to which proposition his companion assented.

"One on us must go back and bring up the boys, while the other lies around to see what takes place here."

Dan returned to bring forward the soldiers, while Ralph Robbins remained to watch the red-skins.

The soldiers, already in a line, were moved forward at a double-quick; the few Indians who had time to rally behind

rocks and trees for the defense of their half-sleeping people were driven in upon their camp, and the entire band sprung from their dreams to confront an exultant and victorious foe. Those who had gone forth to murder and destroy found themselves falling like autumn leaves before the dread power of the infuriated avengers. Warriors, women and children fell, for among those pressing down with grim and bearded faces upon the savage rendezvous were many whose homes had been desolated, whose wives and children had been butchered by these very warriors. It was not strange that those rough men should forget age and sex when brought upon the dreadful arena where their own wrongs could at last be avenged upon the detested race.

The conflict soon became a running fight. The victorious whites pressed the fugitives unrelentingly, dealing death-blows at every step.

Dan Dennison having been engaged on the outskirts of the movement, as flying guard, passed among the lodges, only after the tide of battle had swept on before him. On he went, and had nearly passed beyond the confines of the camp, when he heard a cry of alarm and distress issuing from one of the lodges. It sounded like a child's cry, and was so full of terror that Dan turned and hastened to the lodge.

A few quick bounds brought him to the door, and tearing it open he beheld a sight that aroused all the fury of his nature.

A savage was brandishing a knife, and striking fiercely at a little child not more than three years of age, which was running frantically about the lodge, seeking to escape the fiendish thrusts. The child was white!

"Hyar, red-skin, is yer game, ef ye want white blood!" he shouted, placing the muzzle of his gun against the Indian's breast. "I'm yer man, ye red imp o' darkness!"

The Indian, a tall, supple fellow, at once grasped the barrel of the rifle, and with the quickness of lightning, aimed a murderous lunge at the scout with his keen blade. But Dan was on guard against the blow, for, throwing up the breech of his gun, it struck the savage full in the face, giving him a most uncomfortable blow, and momentarily staggering him. Before the Fox could recover himself the white man had given the coun-

ter-thrust with his own knife, and the warrior toppled over, struck to the heart.

The scout then turned to the trembling, bleeding child, and led it forth. As he stepped outside he encountered Ralph.

"Hello, Dan! What have ye raised now?" he exclaimed.

Dan briefly related what had transpired.

"In course it must belong to somebody what's a prisoner here. Have ye seen any sich this mornin'?"

Ralph had not, and did not think another white person was in the place. The Indians had made very few prisoners, and how the child came in their hands was a great mystery.

"Well, see here, Ralph," said Dan, "you look around and see if you can find any white folks, or any signs of any hevins' been here, and I'll take this poor child down to the crik and wash off the blood and dew up her wounds as well as I can."

Robbins set out upon the investigation as directed, and Denison took the child down to the water and cared for it in the tenderest manner. It was a little girl, putting all manner of monosyllables when her fright had subsided sufficiently to allow her thoughts expression.

The savage had struck her twice with his knife, but the wounds were both slight, and when the blood was washed away, and a trifling bandage, which the scout always carried in case of need, applied, the child seemed as though nothing had happened.

By the time the dressings were completed Ralph Robbins had returned.

"There's no white folks here, nor *been* here," he said. "This child must have been one they tuk some's back, and intended tew make an Injin gal of, but couldn't git her away."

"That's the whole thing, most likely," Dan muttered, as he led her slowly up the bank, and into the midst of the soldiery, now gathering in from the pursuit. "She's as bright as a new rifle-ball, and handsomer than a speckled trout!"

He gazed down upon his prize admiringly, and led her among the interested throng with a proud movement.

A general buzz of remark and inquiry followed, but none had seen or heard of any white persons being taken captive, certainly none had been with the party of Indians just defeated so terribly. Meanwhile, the child clung to her new

found friend and preserver, shrinking from the gaze of the curious who clustered about.

"Well, Dan," said one of the officers, in a jesting manner, "you have got one card more than a full hand! What are you going to do with the little one?"

The old scout looked down upon the sweet face upturned at that moment to his own in childish trust, and watched the nervous little fingers as they worked upon his own brawny digits. What memories or fancies came up at that moment we do not know. Whether Dennison looked back through the misty distance of what had been, or forward to the possibilities of time to come, does not matter for the purposes of our story. It was some minutes before the old scout answered, or raised his eyes, and when he did so, it was with the air of a man who has settled a perplexing question.

"I'm a-goin' tew take the little critter home, and raise her for my own!" he said.

A smile ran over the faces of some who heard the declaration, but quickly vanished as the old scout proceeded:

"Ye see it isn't likely the poor child has any father or mother to care for it any more. But I have a home, such as it is, where I can keep her, and where I can make her as comfortable as possible. I can't foller this kind of life much longer, and when I grow sorter old and helpless, if enny sech time should come, I'll want somebody to take keer of me. By that time she'll be a woman, and if her parents never come to claim her, nor anybody else to take her away from me, I shall be sartin of having some one to keer for me."

"You won't keep her long after she becomes a woman, if she is as beautiful then as she now promises to be," remarked the officer who had before spoken. "I never saw a prettier child anywhere."

The old scout's eyes flashed as though the compliment was one directed to himself, and then he quickly replied:

"No, lieutenant, ye won't never see a purtier chick if ye live tew be older nor that old chap the good book reads about!"

CHAPTER II.

A SAD HOUR.

FIFTEEN years have passed. Dan Dennison goes upon the war-trail no more, and seldom even takes his rifle for a hunt in the adjoining forests. To the question as to what has wrought this change of habits he would answer:

"I'm an old man—tew old to go out now. I shall be sixty-five next month, and my eyesight ain't that good it was once."

All very true. Yet there was another reason which Dan did not state.

Little Esther, she whom he had rescued from the murderous savage many years before, was not the same little prattler as of yore. Years had brought her to the age of young womanhood, and, with her growth had grown the beauty and loveliness which had at first won the scout's sympathy, and induced him to take her for his own child. Never had he regretted the decision of that day. The charm which led him from wild life to *home* was her love and presence there. Finally, one by one, those who had formed a part of his household were removed, and only Esther remained.

From the day that she became sole mistress of the little cabin, near the outskirts of the settlement, it was seldom that Dan left it. A mutual love bound their two hearts together, as though they really had been father and daughter, and very seldom did any word or thought to the contrary pass between them.

All reasonable efforts had long before been made to find the parents of the waif, but, as nothing could be learned in regard to her early history, Dan was more than contented to drop all inquiries, and accept, very thankfully, the daughter that Providence seemed to have provided for his declining years.

It was a warm day in early summer. A gentle breeze swept over the forests, and the shades of the great trees toned down the otherwise oppressive heat. Birds sung glad

strains of rejoicing, and from the open door of Dan Dennison's cabin came other sweet, glad notes, to swell the pæan of general praise.

Esther it was, who, sitting beside the door, with Dennison near her, sung one happy song after another until all her limited stock was exhausted. As the last strain died away she sprung to her feet, and putting a hand upon her foster-parent's shoulder, exclaimed:

"Come, father, get your rifle, and let's try one more shot. I'm sure I can beat you to-day!"

"So you thought the other day," returned Dan, with a smile, "but had tew give in tew yer father once more."

Esther pouted impatiently for a moment, and then continued:

"I always try when you ask me, but you are afraid I shall beat you—I *shall* if you try!"

No more was said. The old man rose from his chair, took down a heavy rifle, and glanced at the priming. Esther was close beside him removing a smaller, more nicely finished weapon from its hooks—one which she claimed as her own property, and which she understood well how to use.

They left the cabin and moved away toward the forest, not far distant, where in an open glade they had spent many hours in practice with their rifles. Esther went slightly in advance, turning at every alternate step to exchange words with her less enthusiastic but not less happy companion. Occasionally her clear laugh rung out till the echoes took it up, and then she would suddenly check herself, as though abashed by the apparent rudeness.

It were difficult to conceive a more diverse or happy picture than this twain presented. Esther, as we have intimated, was very beautiful in form and face. In person she was about the medium height, with a full and faultless figure, a finely formed head, about which her brown hair clustered in shining ringlets, and expressive gray eyes, from which the happy soul seemed looking forth. Her dress was a marvel of neatness and grace, though of necessity very simple.

Dan Dennison was now almost sixty-five, and his hair thickly sprinkled with white. Some of the energy of twenty years previous had departed, but he still walked erect and vigorous, and his bodily powers seemed very little impaired.

The glade was reached, the target arranged, and then the old scout leveled his piece. He took a very careful aim, for, despite all his assumed indifference, he was rather jealous than otherwise of the sharp-shooting powers of his fair *protégé*. Not but that he boasted of her skill, yet it was rather mortifying that a *woman* should so nearly excel him in the use of his favorite weapon.

He fired, and the bullet struck the innermost ring, though it did not pierce the exact center of the target. Dan noted the mark made by his shot and then stepped aside while Esther returned to the stand and sent a bullet through the board.

"You have done it!" he exclaimed, though his tone was scarcely one of satisfaction. "You have beat me!"

"Just as I told you," was the laughing reply, while the gratified riflewoman placed her weapon upon the ground, and looked up archly at her companion.

"Never mind, we'll try it once more," he said, smiling through his mortification.

The pieces were quickly reloaded, and then they took their places for another trial. This time both shot closer than before, but Esther still was ahead, her bullet perforating the exact center of the board.

"That's a *perfect* shot; it can't be bettered," said Dan, decidedly. "I may shoot till I die but I can't beat it."

The old man loaded his rifle this time with much less zest than before, and when the operation was done he rested the breech upon the ground in a very undecided manner.

"What say—shall we try it again?" Esther asked.

"I scarcely care," was the answer, and he looked about though for some better mark.

"Here, father," Esther said, "if you want to try a living mark take yonder hawk."

She pointed almost directly upward, where a heavy-winged bird was idly floating through the delicious, clear air. The old man regarded him for a moment and then raised his piece.

"Most likely the critter wants to make dive upon some of the neighbors' chickens, but if my eyesight is right, and the old gun carries as it used ter, I'll give him a more substantial dinner."

He brought up his piece, and following the movements of

the bird carefully he fired. The hawk swayed from its course somewhat, but without manifesting any decided alarm, floated away over another part of the settlement until it was nearly lost to view.

Dennison dropped his gun with an exclamation of impatience.

"It's sartin that thing didn't go as fast as an Injin'd 'a' run, and in times I *have* seen, any red-skin what would ha' showed his head at that distance, no matter if he'd been on a keen run, would have stood a fair chance and more of gittin' a ball through it. But, it's sartin that I can't see as I used tew, and my narves ain't that stiddy they was one time."

Esther kept her eye upon the hawk, watching it as it faded away into the veriest speck in the far distance, scarcely perceptible to the sharpest gaze, and then gradually appeared, drawing nearer and assuming more positive proportions till it began again to fade away.

Finally its circuits seemed to flow back again toward the watchers. At each sweep it came nearer and retreated not so far, till at length it floated, with head turned down and a suspicious eye peering into the depth of the forest, almost directly over them.

Esther was still watching his movements, and when the proper moment arrived turned to her foster-father.

"Isn't he about the same distance now, father?"

"Jest about the same," was the answer. "But it won't do any good to try him with that little gun, for it won't kerry to him!"

The maiden did not desist, however. She had entered into the trial of skill with her whole soul, and could she but bring down the bird, she felt it would be quite honor enough for one day. Raising her piece carefully she took a deliberate aim, and just when the hawk remained a moment almost stationary as he wheeled in mid-air, her little rifle sent its sharp voice ringing up through the tree-tops.

The hawk turned over quickly in the air, and dropped some distance in a confused manner, then regaining his poise continued to settle rapidly toward the earth.

"See, father, I hit him!" Esther shouted, as she lowered her rifle.

"I guess not," was the reluctant reply. "Just wait a moment and you'll see he'll scoot off some other way. But you did scare him bad—the ball must have cut 'tarnal close to him."

"I tell you it did more than scare him, father," persisted the fair sharp-shooter. "See, there he comes, all in a pile yonder, down in the clearing."

It was even so. The hawk had fallen in the clearing adjoining, and from their present stand-point both of the spectators could see it flutter and struggle without the ability to rise.

Dan could no longer doubt the shot.

"We'll go over and pick it up," he said. "It's few women in this land can boast of shooting a hawk on the wing, especially when such as Dan Dennison hev tried with a longer rifle and missed. And among the few that could shoot one on a tree, there ain't one can hold a candle to my pet for good looks."

"Hush, father, you should not talk so loud! Here comes a stranger!"

"I do believe I'm gittin' deaf, as well as blind," the former scout muttered, as he turned to meet the new-comer.

This personage, who had almost reached the party unperceived, by coming around the corner of the wood, was approaching them with a peculiar smile, scrutinizing them both closely as he drew near. As he was a stranger even to Dennison, the latter regarded him quite sharply.

In age the new-comer had probably seen fifty years, and perchance nearly a decade more. He was short in stature, though heavily built, and with a frame which betokened great power of physical endurance. His countenance was not one easily read. While it was far from appearing frank and open, it had not the appearance of any covert, deadly wrong lurking there. As we have just said, a smile overspread it as he approached, notwithstanding the huge tobacco-quid stowed away in one cheek.

His dress was that of backwoodsmen in general, and he carried a rifle almost as long as himself. A powder-horn and bullet-pouch hung over his shoulder, and an ugly-looking knife was sheathed in his belt.

"Ah, good-mornin', strangers," he said, with a volubility scarcely to be expected. "I hearn yer firin' and come this

way, and right glad I am to see ye. I've been trampin' a 'tarnal while, and I'm almost fagged out, though that's suthin' I very seldom say, myself."

He extended his hand, which Dennison took, and when he had given it a cordial shake the old scout said:

"Come into my cabin and rest yourself. 'Tis but a step or tew away from here."

"I'm much obliged tew ye, stranger, but I don't keer tew stop. I'm lookin' fer a man what lives some'rs about here, and I don't want tew stop till I find him. I've been lookin' fer him this many a year, and now I hope ter find him right quick."

Why did a chill of dread creep over the frame of Dan Dennison—he who had never feared mortal man in deadly conflict?

"Who did yer want tew find?" he asked, anticipating the reply.

"A man what was an independent scout in the Black Hawk war, called Dan Dennison—most likely yer know him if he lives hereabouts."

"*Dan Dennison*—that is *my* name!" the old scout exclaimed.

"No—you are not Dan Dennison!" the other vociferated, as though quite unable to believe himself, and glancing quickly at Esther.

"Yes, I am the man you look for."

The old man tried to speak calmly, but his voice had a most strangely hollow tone.

"Were you a scout at that time?"

"I was."

"There was no other Dan Dennison?"

"Never hearn tell of any."

The new-comer gazed sharply from one to the other for a few moments, and then asked:

"This is your darter, is it?"

"Yes, yes, that is her," said the foster-father, almost painfully.

"I knew it," the other said, in a tone of strange meaning.

"*I saw the mother's looks in a moment!*"

Dennison stood as though confounded for a moment, and then he said in wild, startled tones:

"Esther, go—go get the bird—and take it to the house; we'll be there in a minute!"

The girl obeyed, but she felt scarcely less disturbed than the speaker. What had transpired she could not imagine, for the last sentences had not reached her ears. But she knew that her foster-father was most strangely agitated. What it was that could agitate *him* so deeply she had no idea. Was it possible that he had committed some fearful crime, and that retribution was about to come upon him? She could not believe *that*—she would not *think* it unless quite obliged to do so.

Many were the reasons and explanations she framed, but singular as it may seem, the real cause never once occurred to her mind. She returned to the house, and having laid away her rifle and equipments very carefully, she sat down to await the arrival of the man she called "father," and his strange guest.

When the two men were left alone it was some time before either spoke. They watched Esther as she moved away, and when she was hidden from their sight the stranger turned to Dennison.

"That's a fine-lookin' gal—a noble-lookin' gal," he said, in an earnest manner, which yet did not exactly please the listener.

"Thar's no finer ones in this world!" was the emphatic response.

"You may well say that."

There was an awkward pause of a few moments, and then Dan continued:

"Ye may as well speak it at once, and tell me ye've come to rob me of her," he said, bitterly.

A strange expression shot over the visitor's face.

"Dan Dennison, ye use hard words," he said, with intense emphasis. "*That gal is my own flesh and blood—my darter!*"

Dennison looked at him steadfastly for a moment, and then his eyes dropped.

"If she's your gal, and you've got the proof of it, why, of course, you've got to have her."

The stranger seemed almost disposed to be angry, but controlled his feelings, and said:

"It seems you are almost inclined to be unreasonable

Now let me tell you just how the thing is. When the Injin troubles, fifteen year ago this summer, was at their highest, I packed up a few of my goods, got a team and tried tew make my way back whar 'twas safer, 'cause my wife had got nigh about skeered out of her senses by the stories we kept hearin' every day. Possibly if we'd staid whar we were 'twould have been all right. Nobody ken say. But we started, and the first day we was overhauled by the reds."

The stranger paused a moment, and looked away, as though the memory of the scene was oppressive still. When he resumed, it was with a more subdued tone of voice.

"My wife was killed, and the babe with her. Our little child—this that you call Esther—was taken by the savages. Then they consulted a long while about me. Some wanted to kill me on the spot, and others wanted to kerry me off a prisoner. Well, the upshot of the whole matter was that I wasn't killed, but me and the little girl went off with the Injins. A week or more went along, and we lay around in the reds' camp, waitin' fer suthin'. Finally we parted, and *Emily*—that's what *we* called the little gal—went with one part of the gang, and I with another. Of course we didn't *want* ter dew that way, but we couldn't have our own say.

"Not a great while arter that the reds war driven back intew their own country, but they tuk me with 'em. When we got thar I begun to inquire for Emily. But nobody knowed any thing about her. I was clean discouraged out, but at last I happened to dew a red-skin a good turn, and he told me about my poor gal. He said that the fust fight they hed with the pale-face braves the gal was left behind, but he thought she was killed. He said he knew so at fust, but arterwards owned up that he didn't know, only he 'spected. I felt that bad then, stranger, that I didn't keer very much whether I lived or died. But I staid thar with the reds, and worked for 'em, and finally got so quiet and contented that I seen I could git away if I wanted ter. The truth was I thought my gal was among the reds somewhar, and they didn't intend for me to know it. If she was thar I meant to find her. I didn't know just how to go about it, but I worked fust and gained the favor of the Injins so that they allowed me to do pretty much as if I was one o' their number.

"By-and-by I begun ter pull off a day ter a time, and go around from one part of the tribes to another, generally comin' back at night, or within a day or two. When I found this worked parfictly well I took a week—then a month, till all the Irjins begun to know me, and let me go whar I pleased. I need not stop to tell you how I spea' long years a-huntin' for my Emily through all the tribes, and everywhar that I thought likely she could be. Of course I didn't find her, and arter a long while I begun ter think what I'd been told must be true. But I wouldn't quite believe that. It seemed to me my gal was livin' somewhar, and finally I left the reds for good, and come back this way. I inquired everywhar, and finally found one man that told me you had saved a little gal at the very fight in which she was said to have been killed. I knew in a moment that 'twas my little gal, and that she hadn't been killed. Ye kin jedge what a satisfaction that war to me. I tell you I cried like a baby!

"But that was all. I couldn't l'arn another word, any kind of way, and there it rested. I went everywhar, and asked everybody. I even went by this place within less'n ten mile, but fate did not allow me to find my darter then. I gave up at last, and settled down, to end my days in solitude, for I was terribly lonely after learning that my darter was alive and I could not find her. Some years passed, and then I met a man who knew you. It was at La Crosse I met him, and I had his name, but it is gone from me now. He told me that you had saved a little gal from massacre by the Indians, and afterwards adopted her. And from his description I knew the gal must be the one I'd hearn of before. I found as near as I could whar you might be stoppin', and come out.

"Here I be, and if ye ever had any children of yer own, ye kin jedge suthin' how I feel to find my little gal livin', growd up intew sech a purty young woman, the parfict picter of her mother. After all these long years o' huntin' it seems almost too much to think I've found her at last!"

The manner of the speaker seemed to partake both of joy and sorrow, and he often gazed fondly in the direction taken by Esther, as though in the hope of seeing her once more.

After he ceased, neither spoke for a brief time. Dennison stood leaning against a tree, with head bowed, as though some great stroke had come upon him, but at length he raised his eyes, and looking at the stranger remarked, in a tone not entirely that of satisfaction :

"Well, stranger, ye tell a very straight story, and ye claim tew be the father of my Esther; but ye don't tell me what yer 'own name is."

The one addressed was looking at him earnestly as he spoke, and did not move or display any emotion as he answered :

"So I did not—blunderer that I am. I am called Hank Carroll. Maybe yer not satisfied that I'm the gal's father! I rather jedge from yer tone that ye ain't quite, though I hope so."

"I have no reason to doubt yer word," the old man replied, sorrowfully. "Ye told me a straightforward story, and I know the gal ain't none o' mine, though I couldn't love her any more if she were. I'd really begun to look forrad to closin' my life with her to take keer of me. But she's your own darter, and you've got a better claim nor what I kin hev."

Hank Carroll paced back and forth for some moments before he again addressed Dan Dennison, and then he stopped full in front of him, and gazed him in the face as he said :

"Dennison, I've hunted long years, and now at last I've found my darter. She is all there is in this world to me. My wife is gone, and my whole life is broken up. I find myself now growing old, and I have done nothing. But now, with Emily for a help, I can pass the few years that remain to me this side of the grave in happiness. Do ye blame me for wantin' to dew it? Do ye blame me for feelin' glad when I find my darter such a nice woman, jest the pictur' of her mother when she died, and wantin' to take her tew the home that's been a-waitin' for her so long?"

Dennison shook his head slowly.

"I can't blame ye, of course; I *don't* blame ye, but I can't help bein' selfish, and thinkin' how lonely and mis'able I *shall* be. But I hadn't orte. I won't any more."

And rising, the old man continued :

"Come, we'll go to the house now and tell the news to Esther."

The maiden had awaited their coming with much anxiety. What was in store for her in the way of a surprise she could not imagine, though she continued to feel a multitude of fears. Nor did they vanish as the two men finally approached the cabin. She saw that her foster-father was very much agitated, and knew that something much out of the usual line had occurred. A dreadful, sinking fear oppressed her soul as she bent forward to catch his first words.

"Here, Esther," he said, with much emotion, "here is your father—your *own* father!"

Strange that such words should cause a sensation of dread! Yet so it was, and Esther, when she heard them, felt as though some fearful fate was upon her.

"Why, father," she exclaimed, quickly, grasping Dennison's hand, "*you* are a good father to me! How pale and strange you look! What is the matter?"

"Oh, nothing, Esther," was the quieting reply. "Only we have so long since given up all hopes of ever seeing your father again, and now he comes upon us so suddenly that I suppose I am a little nervous. I never used tew git nervous when I war younger."

"My little Emily," Carroll said, coming forward, "I have been hopin' and waitin' for this minit fifteen long year. It has come at last, and now I have found you!"

"Can it be that you are my *real* father?" the maiden asked, gazing at her new-found relative.

She had allowed him to grasp her hands, and even to draw her toward him, though she could not so suddenly make herself realize that the man who now held her, so different in all except kindness and apparent truth of manner from the man she had sometimes dreamed of as bearing that relation, was her father.

"I hope you will have no doubts of it, after I tell yer my story," he said, gazing upon her beautiful features as if in a dreamy fascination.

"I can not doubt it, of course," she said, scarcely weighing the words she uttered, "but you are so much different from the person I had imagined and dreamed my father to be. I

CHAPTER III.

SOMETHING MYSTERIOUS.

WILL WILDER was a young man living not far from Dennison's cabin, who had often met Esther, frequently tried his rifle against hers, and as frequently been defeated. People had gossiped and surmised for a long time, and yet, until the very moment when he had been told that she was going away, did Will know the nature of his feelings for her. But now he was painfully aware of the fact that he loved her, deeply and truly.

So now he came back to "see how the land lay"—to see if the new father could not be persuaded in some manner to come to the home of his daughter, instead of taking her far away where Will could see her no more. But, the young lover, who had never talked a word of love to Esther, was more than repulsed, though far from unkindly, and left the place with a greater heart-load of sorrow than he ever had expected to carry.

The following day passed rapidly, though it was freighted with a great deal of unhappiness. Many of the neighbors, hearing different versions of the affair, came running in to learn more, and speak words of farewell to the maiden whom all regretted to spare.

Evening had come—the last Esther was ever to spend in the old familiar cabin.

The rude lamp, freshly supplied with wood-chuck oil, burned upon the little table, while half a dozen persons sat about the room.

Esther was there, sitting near her father, while the balance of those present were friends who had dropped in to repeat their regrets that she must leave them, to express their hopes for her continued prosperity, and, more than all else, it may be, observe the man who had thus found his daughter after so long a lapse of time.

Dan Dennison was not there, and the fact of his absence

Esther and her foster-parent heaved a sigh, and while they did not reply audibly, Carroll continued :

"I know just how 'tis ; a week or a month hence 'twill make no difference with ye, 'cause 'twill come jest as hard tew separate. Howsomever, we'll not think any more about that. I shall stay around here till the time of setting out, and maybe some better arrangement can be made atween this and that."

Although the moments seemed weighted with weariness and sadness, yet they passed all too quickly, and when the shades of night settled down, Esther could only moan sadly to herself, as she gazed out at the fading sky :

"Only one more day here in this happy home !"

A young man sprung up beside her as she sat there, and greeted her with a profound bow.

"What ye a-lookin' so sober about ?" he asked, in a careless way.

"Will," she replied, sadly, "my own father has come, and I've only one more day to stay here. Then I am going home with him."

"Jerusalem !" was the unstudied exclamation.

"That's what makes me feel so," she continued. "I do not really want to go, but he is my father, and so I should not pain him by any appearance of willfulness."

"That's so," was the melancholy rejoinder, and Will Wilder walked slowly from the spot as Carroll approached, gulping down the "feelings" that would rise in his throat.

"I almost think ye ain't 'stonishin' glad to have yer father find ye, arter all," he said, as he placed himself beside his daughter.

"Yes, dear father, indeed I am glad," the maiden returned, placing her hand in his. "But you must know that the parting hour is a sad one, where I have lived long and happily, as here."

"Do not feel tew sad, darter," was the affectionate reply. "We'll try tew make it as comfortable in yer new hum as it's been here, and I don't hev any fears but ye'll like it as well."

He stopped short, for Will Wilder came toward them again, his eyes bent on the ground as though counting the chips at his feet.

thought you to be a tall man, much like my father—I mean *this* father,” and she pointed to Dennison. “But of course that was only a dream.”

“Only a dream, dear gal. It was very nat’ral that livin’ here with Dan ye should come to like him so, and think yer own father must be jest the same sort of a man. But ye see I am quite different.”

“Yes, indeed you are.”

Then after a brief silence, she added :

“You are *sure* that you are my father, are you not?”

“Well, I’ll tell yer, and then ye kin jedge for yerself.”

He placed his rifle outside the door, seated himself upon a chair, and proceeded to relate the same facts in substance that he had recently given to Dan Dennison.

When he concluded, a considerable period of silence followed, which none seemed anxious to break. Esther could not feel happy, for it certainly appeared that the new-found father intended to take her away from the present home, where she was bound by so many ties and recollections. What fortune would come to her in its stead? Ah, she could not tell!

Nor did she feel any decided attraction toward the new father. He was not what she had sometimes thought her father must be, though she could not have plead guilty to any especial dislike. After all, it was something of a satisfaction to know that the great mystery was at last cleared away. If she herself was a second representation of her mother, and this man was her living father, the two greatest enigmas of her life were solved.

Dan Dennison pulled out hair after hair from his long beard, and when he had gained courage enough to hear the answer of the question that had long been struggling in his mind, he gave it utterance.

“Carroll,” he said, “of course now’t ye’ve found yer darter, ye want tew take her hum, and hev a joyful time of it. When did ye karkilate to go?”

“I was intendin’ we’d start to-morrer,” he said, looking toward Esther.

“So soon?” both his hearers asked in a breath.

“Well, maybe that is too soon,” he continued. “I don’t want tew hurry up matters too fast. How’d day arter dew?”

perplexed Esther more than a little. He had left the cabin early in the afternoon, telling her that he should be away for an hour or two, and from that time she had neither seen nor heard from him. Despite the many other matters requiring her attention, she found herself looking from the door every few minutes, and watching for his return.

The deep shades of twilight had spread, and merged the whole earth in a covering of night, when she at length heard his step, and in a few moments more he hastily entered.

All present noticed the look of satisfaction—joy, almost—which rested upon the old man's features, though all felt surprised at it, and wondered what could have occurred at such a time to give him any real pleasure. They were not long left in doubt.

"Esther, my gal," he said, "I've got a bit of good news for ye! I'm goin' along with ye!"

"Oh, how glad I am!" the impulsive maiden cried, clasping him around the neck, and almost weeping with joy.

"Ah, indeed; how far will ye go with us?" Carroll asked, rising to his feet with a sudden interest.

"How fur?" repeated the old man, slowly. "That I can't tell ye sir, for I never hev made out exactly whar ye live. But, I'm goin' as fur as the gal does. I'm goin' *whar* she does. 'Thar's nothin' tew keep me here now she is goin' away, so I've jest put my place intew another man's hands, and b'rt me a good hoss, so I kin go with ye. I kin live anywhar, and when I'm near you and her, I shall be tu hum—nowhar else."

"Yes, indeed. That'll be very pleasant for all of us," said Carroll.

Still, there seemed something in his tones which indicated that he was not quite pleased with the arrangement. Yet a few moments after, the old hunter thought he must have been mistaken in the fancy, for Carroll was loudest in expressing his satisfaction.

Esther seemed another being. All her fears, and dread, and sorrow had come from parting with Dennison, the man who had been a father to her so long; and now that he was to accompany them, the great weight came up with a movement which left her almost as light-hearted as of yore. True, she

still regretted bidding her kind friends a last "good-by," but to compensate for this, she was to enjoy her own father's presence and care, and all the great mystery of her life, over which she had sometimes pondered so much, was to be removed.

When morning came, it gave promise of an exceedingly pleasant day. Birds made the balmy air vocal with life and gladness. The broad sun chased away the sparkling dew-drops, and rolled his golden disk upward as though proud of the conquest.

With the coming of light, Esther and the two men were astir. A slight breakfast was served, and then the party gave itself up to preparations.

"You are goin' a hossback, I understood ye," the old scout remarked, pausing near where Carroll sat, looking from the open door.

"Yes, I am," Hank replied, "and I expected a friend here afore this with the hosses. Zeph Sniffen is his name. He's helped me a deal in my s'arch, and I seen him yesterday, and he promised tew hev some hosses here in time to start. Can't be he'll fail me."

But the moments passed away, and neither Sniffen nor the horses made an appearance.

All was ready for departure, and those assembled began to fear lest Zeph had in some manner forgotten his part of the programme. Nearly all the settlers in the vicinity had gathered, and Dan had given to some of the party his last article of movable property, when a horseman, leading two other animals, rode around the corner of the forest into sight.

Esther had listened to much praise of Zeph from her father, who spoke of him as the truest friend he possessed on earth, and had formed an idea that he was really a fine-looking young man. On obtaining a close view her anticipations speedily vanished.

Zeph Sniffen was tall, standing considerably over six feet, but was quite slim, and decidedly round-shouldered. His hair was hanging down upon his shoulders in yellow, soapy locks. A thin, straggling beard grew upon his face, several shades lighter than his hair, some individual hairs of which

had attained considerable length, but the majority seemed to curl back at short range, as though afraid of the cold they might encounter. Add to this a set of not very intelligent features, the principal one of which had at some time been badly knocked awry by some unlucky blow, and you have a partial idea of the man who, with a hideous leer upon his face, sprang from the foremost horse, and proceeded to shake hands heartily with his friend Carroll.

"Esther," said the father, leading him toward the maiden, "this is my very dear friend, Zeph Sniffen! I've not any doubt but he'll prove as true tew you as he has to me."

Esther bowed, and greeted the young man kindly, endeavoring not to notice his outstretched hand. But he was not thus to be put off.

"Shake hands, Esther," he said, in a shrill, squeaking voice. "I allers feel better acquainted arter I've had a holt of a body's hand. Don't you?"

"It may be," she answered, rather indifferently.

A sense of loathing came over her, despite all her efforts to repress it, and turning to her father, she asked:

"Father, are you not ready?"

"I am, and have been waiting," he replied. "So if you will say your good-byes to this place we'll be off."

A succession of farewells, couched in varying language, followed, accompanied by hand-shakes and brief caresses. There were many wet eyes, and unsteady voices, for everybody had come to love the old scout and his beautiful *protégé*.

Last of all Will Wilder approached, and offered his hand, which Esther took with a sensation she could not have explained, at the time.

"Hang it all, Esther," he said, in low tones, for Zeph Sniffen was standing near, "I wish I was a-goin' along too. Seems as 'o, I couldn't bear it, but I s'pose I must!"

He spoke in a disconsolate manner and turned away, as though he would hide his feelings from those present.

The party mounted and rode off, accompanied by most of those who had assembled to observe their departure. Esther turned back as they reached the corner of the forest, and gave a last farewell gaze upon the spot which had been her home from her earliest recollection. But the sharp thrill of her

anguish had been dissipated by the fact that her foster-father was to make one of the party, and so she dashed away the tears that would struggle forth, and amused herself by balancing her rifle, which she persisted in carrying, upon the horn of her saddle.

Gradually the accompanying friends, one by one, dropped off, the road they were pursuing became more indistinct and uncertain, the dark forest was no longer broken by clearings, and the four rode onward alone toward new scenes and new destinies.

They rode slowly, for the day was warm to oppression already. After proceeding some ten miles it was suggested by the officious Zeph that they "hold up, and give the hosses a breathin' spell."

No objection was made, and beside a stream which trickled through a dark valley, where great trees almost entirely excluded the sunbeams, the party dismounted, and remained for some time in pleasant conversation. A legend was connected with the brook which Dan related, and then the party once more mounted.

Zeph was the last to spring into his saddle, and as he attempted to do so the girth gave way, and saddle and Zeph came to the ground in a pile. A laugh greeted the movement, which ceased as the unfortunate man regained his feet.

"That ain't any larfin' matter!" he exclaimed, almost savagely, as he raised the saddle. "Didn't hurt me any, but here my girt is broke, and how I'm goin' ter mend it is more'n I see."

He stood surveying the wreck with a doleful face, while Dennison sprung from his horse and approached the spot.

"That ain't any thing," the old man exclaimed. "If ye had rid the miles I hev ye'd know how to fix it."

"I wish you'd help me, then; will you?" Sniffen said, more humbly. "I never was no great of a hand to codger up things."

"Sartin, I'll hev ye all right in five minutes," the old man replied, applying himself to the work in hand.

"Sha'n't we ride on kinder slow, and let 'em overtake us when they git mended?" Carroll asked of his daughter.

Ester had no good grounds for objection, and so she

assented to the proposal, and rode on with her father. They maintained an easy pace for fully two miles, but nothing was seen or heard of those they had left behind. Carroll looked back occasionally, but their delay seemed to give him no uneasiness.

Not so with his daughter. Every thing was new and strange to her, and that which might have seemed a trifle to others alarmed her.

"What can detain them so long?" she asked, looking back while a long tract of the road was in view.

"Does seem about time they come along," the father remarked. "Maybe we'd better wait for 'em. Though course thar ain't any thing wrong."

They waited some minutes still, and finally Zeph rode into view at a moderate pace. But he came alone.

"I don't raley see intew that," Steve muttered, as Zeph came unconcernedly on.

"Where can my father be?" Esther asked, as Sniffen came almost within speaking distance of them.

"Here is your *father*, child," Carroll said in a light tone.

"Certainly, father, I know it; but you must excuse me if my tongue makes mistakes sometimes, after calling Mr. Dennison my father so long."

By this time the lank Zeph, bending forward over his horse's neck as he rode, in a most ungraceful, and it would seem uncomfortable, position, was within easy speaking distance, and both father and daughter asked him at once:

"Where is Dennison?"

The individual addressed straightened himself up somewhat, and replied:

"The old man went back arter his hoss. While he's a fixin' up my saddle-girt his hoss started off, and must hev gone some ways, acause we couldn't find it around thar. So he told me to come and tell yer to go on, slow, and he'd soon overtake ye. But, I've a idee that he'll hev tew foller his hoss clear home afore he puts paws on him ag'in."

"Poor old man," Esther sighed, instinctively

"What an unfortunate affair!" her father exclaimed. "But he will probably overtake us to-night, so we had better keep on; or we'll wait, or go back, if *you say so!*"

"Of course we can't help him any if we go back," she mused, more to herself than to the listeners.

"Not a bit," Carroll returned, "and it'll make us twenty miles more of travel. It seems to me we'd better keep on and camp early."

"That's jist what the old man said," Zeph returned. "I told him I'd ride back and git his hoss, or go back with him; but no, he said I'd better go on and tell Esther, cause she'd feel skeert, likely, if she didn't know what'd acome of him."

And the speaker leered at the maiden with one of his sickening grins.

But the maiden did not especially notice the leer. She was reflecting at that moment how like her foster-father it was to think of her, and send on word in advance that he was not kept from her by any serious cause.

The journey was resumed, but within an hour Esther found herself looking anxiously back, for the coming of her foster-father.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BLOOD-STAIN.

A TERRIBLE sense of loneliness came over Esther when deprived of the companionship of Dan Dennison. True, her father was kind, though he did not manifest any strong symptoms of decided affection. Zeph endeavored to make himself particularly agreeable, and his hideous leers were freely bestowed upon every possible occasion.

Why she should feel such a dislike for this man, the maiden could not tell, though she asked herself often. Like any sensible girl, she realized that he was not to be blamed for what nature had inflicted upon him, nor yet for the circumstances under which he had grown to manhood. Still, so very disagreeable were his attentions and grimaces to her that she sought refuge in the society of her father.

All day they journeyed, never fast, and stopping at times for rest and refreshment; still they passed many weary miles, and when the sun was sinking in the western sky they selected

a camping-place for the night. A large fire was built, that its light might guide the old scout in reaching them, and then a bush-tent was built for Esther to occupy.

A little stream ran over a rocky bed close beside the camping-ground, and while the preparations were being made our heroine strolled away beside it. First she bathed her hands and face freely in the pure, refreshing water, then drank from a natural little reservoir formed in a rock, and then, crossing the stream, seated herself on a mossy bank, and fell into a reverie.

It was the first opportunity for solitude she had enjoyed that day, and a great sensation of rest and quiet came upon her soul. A cluster of bushes partially screened her from view of the encampment, from which she gazed forth sometimes to see if Dennison had joined the party; but as often finding that he had not, relapsed into her former quiet.

She was still sitting there when Zeph came plunging down to the stream. The maiden supposed that he intended to inflict himself upon her, and began to arise; but finding that he stopped at the brook and began to wash his hunting-frock vigorously, she resumed her former position.

For some minutes Zeph continued his scrubbing and wringing, but finally stopped, and closely scrutinized the wrist and arm.

"Thar, confound the blood!" he exclaimed. "I've got *that* off. I 'spected she'd see it, though, afore I could dew it. Why in nater I couldn't *tech* the old cuss without gittin'—"

He happened to look up at the moment, and saw a portion of Esther's dress, which he had not observed before. With a spring he bounded across the stream and then stood confronting her for some time, during which neither spoke.

"Well, Miss Esther," he said at length, "I didn't know you was hyar."

"What possible difference could it make to you whether I was here or somewhere else?" she asked, almost sharply.

"Nothin'," he returned after a momentary hesitation, "nothin', onless you war afraid of blood!"

"And supposing I were?"

"Wal, only I've been a-bleedin' my hoss a trifle, and got

some blood on my hand and frock. I'm willin' tew own, I don't like tew see it myself—not in sech a way."

Esther did not speak her thoughts. She was not afraid of blood in the abstract, but the blood-stain which Zeph had just been removing had struck her with horror. It suggested dreadful thoughts and suspicions, none of which she dared entertain, and yet which she could not banish if she would. At one moment she thought of openly accusing Sniffen of a crime, and then her better judgment prevailed, and she realized if he had done any foul deed, he had, no doubt, prepared himself for a stout denial, and the very fact of being accused, would put him more perfectly on his guard, so she merely inquired:

"Has father Dennison come yet?"

"No—that is, I think not," the fellow replied, in his usual tone.

Dennison had not come, as she found upon reaching camp, nor had he arrived when darkness settled in all its gloom over the wide forests.

Esther could watch for him no longer, so she crept into her rude tent, and threw herself upon the bed of boughs, for she was very weary.

She did not wish to sleep now, for she thought that her foster-father might come soon. At the same time terrible fears oppressed her soul, which she could not help feeling, and yet which she would not admit, even to her own mind.

Whether her eyes were closed or open, she seemed to see a livid hand extended from the darkness, the wrist smeared with fresh blood, and the sleeve clotted with the same.

She would have gone to her father, told him all her suspicions, and asked his advice, but Zeph remained near him, as though fearing something of the kind. So Esther contented herself with examining her rifle, which she placed close beside her, in readiness for any intruder, and then finally fell sleep.

Her dreams were terrible visions, and she often awoke in affright. On glancing forth she could see her father and Zeph near the fire, generally sleeping, and all about them quiet. Then she would sink down again, and repeat the farce of sleeping.

When morning drew near she could stay in that place of

horror no longer, and stole forth, taking her rifle as a defense against any wild beast she might encounter.

She could not help feeling that Dennison *must* be on his way to overtake them, and so she strolled back along the route they had followed the previous evening in coming to the place. It was *possible*, though she scarcely dared hope, that she might meet him coming up with them.

She walked at least two miles without any adventure, and then, as daylight began to penetrate the forest, she turned, sadly, to retrace her weary way. She was scarcely disappointed at not meeting the old scout, for something in her heart seemed whispering her that the kind old man had been foully murdered; and more, she believed that Zeph Sniffen had done the deed!

Yes, she admitted to herself now what she had long tried not to believe, and the dreadful thought came surging over her soul, burying it as beneath a tide of woes. She threw herself upon the ground at the foot of a giant tree, and gave way to a long, bitter burst of tears. Then she resumed her way once more.

When within some eighty rods of the encampment she saw a large bear near the path, conducting itself in a most singular manner. Stepping behind a bush, that she might not be likely to frighten it, she remained for some time watching its movements. At last, as it came into full view, at close range, she stepped from behind the bush, and aimed her rifle.

A most strange movement and transformation took place. The bear sprang upright, and throwing off the hide which had enveloped it, and formed the disguise, revealed the lank proportions of Zeph Sniffen.

For a moment, Esther wished that she had fired, but she checked herself, and advanced toward the man, still keeping her gun presented.

"Don't shoot, Miss Esther: you see it's me," he exclaimed in tones not altogether free from apprehension.

Esther did not lower the muzzle of her gun, but kept on advancing till she stood within a few feet of him, when, raising the hammer quickly, she demanded sternly:

"Did *you* spare that old man when he asked you?"

"Oh, Miss Esther!" the fellow cried in sore affright.

"you're terribly mistaken. I didn't touch old Mr. Dennison. That blood I was washin' off come from my hoss's mouth! I tell you the truth, it did!"

"Don't try to deceive me," the maiden continued; "tell me the truth, or I shall shoot!"

"Ye kin shoot if ye wanter," he whined; "but you'll kill an innercent man, and one of the best friends that *you've* got. I wouldn't harm a hair on nobody's head, if I could help it."

"Own up!" she persisted, fiercely.

"I've told ye all I know," he said. "If ye want tew know more ye'll have tew ask the old man, for thar he comes!"

Esther looked around, but she did not see Dan coming. She turned quickly, expecting treachery, but Zeph remained standing, with folded arms.

"Why, whar ye lookin'?" he asked. "Here, back on the road yonder!"

She followed the direction of his eye and finger. As she turned her head, Zeph sprung upon her like a panther, and ere she could recover herself, he had succeeded in wrenching the rifle from her hands.

"Here—give me my gun," she demanded.

"I'd like ter," he replied in an insinuating tone, "but a rifle ain't jist the thing for a gal what's half crazy to run around the woods with."

And he let down the hammer as he spoke.

"Then you will not give it to me?"

"Not jest now; ye might take a notion to shoot me, ye know!"

Esther had taken in more of the field than Zeph had given her credit for—more, in fact than he had thought of. She saw his own rifle standing against a tree some rods away, where he had placed it that he might assume his disguise. Toward it she fled like a frightened deer, and before Sniffen had fairly comprehended her purpose, and could start in pursuit, she had the weapon in her grasp, and brought to bear upon him, with the hammer raised.

"Murderer, you *shall* die!" she shouted wildly, though her nerves were calm and steady. "You showed *him* no mercy—my best friend on earth, and I am going to avenge *him*."

Shoot me if you wish, but I am determined that you shall not escape me."

Zeph had looked around for a shelter, but none was within reach. He had heard Dan Dennison relate the skill Esther displayed in handling the rifle, and felt that his doom was at hand. She partially raised her gun, while at the same time he continued to plead:

"Don't shoot, Esther; I tell you you'll kill an innocent man if you do!"

"Hilloa, here; what's goin' on?" asked a sharp voice, and Carroll appeared on the scene. "Here, Esther, what is the matter?"

The maiden dropped the breach of the rifle she held to the ground, and in a half-bewildered manner gazed at the two men. Zeph approached, and as she did not immediately reply to Carroll's question, he volunteered to explain.

"Ye see, Hank," he remarked, in the blandest tones possible, though his voice was not quite steady, "the gal must be crazy, or suthin'. She seems ter think I've killed old Dennison, and is bound to shoot me for it. Last night she seen me washin' my hands arter I'd bled that old hoss, and it seemed ter effect her quite a little at the time. This mornin', as the old man hain't come, she is bound to shoot me for killin' him!"

"My gal, is that a fact?" her father asked, solemnly. "Would you, upon a bare suspicion—a most unfounded suspicion—shoot our best friend?"

"It must be I was not myself," she said. "Let me go back to camp with you, and my brain will be clearer soon. But, I had such horrible visions last night, my head feels strangely."

"Visions!" the men repeated, glancing about quickly.

"Yes. I had some terrible visions, but it must be they were not true. Let us say no more about them."

They walked back toward the camp, Carroll leading his daughter, and carrying her rifle, while Zeph followed some distance in the rear.

Esther said but little, though she readily consented that her father should retain her rifle until she felt perfectly calm, or until Dennison should join them. The morning meal was prepared, and then the party remained waiting until about

ten o'clock, that the old scout might join them before starting.

When at length it was decided to set forth, and no Dan had come, it seemed to Esther as though the last hope was being extinguished. She felt more than ever convinced in her own mind, that there had been foul play with her dear old friend, and she longed to ride back and investigate.

In vain her father assured her that more than likely the old scout had but just set forth that morning upon his way. In that case he would not reach them till nearly night, and they had better move on a few miles, and wait for him at some convenient point.

Again they journeyed on, and again the day faded away. The night was passed in waiting, and the following morning came, bringing not the expected one. Once more they waited till ten o'clock, and again set forth, to journey into the wilderness, Esther knew not whither.

And so, five weary days passed. No old scout came to them, and now both Carroll and Zeph joined in the declaration that something must have occurred to detain him. But no great matter. Very likely he would come on soon. Esther could not even hope. She felt that she had looked for the last time upon the dearest friend she knew upon earth, and the thought made her inexpressibly sad.

Before the five days had passed, it was evident that they were in the Indian country. Roving bands met them at times, and sometimes they passed Indian settlements, but all the savages seemed to know Carroll, and treated the party with the utmost respect.

Esther wondered at this, and inquired what it meant, but only received as an answer that she would know some time and then would not think the Indians half as black as they had been painted.

Toward the close of the fifth day, they came suddenly upon a large log-house, standing in a small clearing. The party drew rein, and the father said to his daughter:

"There, Esther, is your home!"

"Not here in the midst of the Indians?"

"*That's the place,*" was the decided answer. "**Ye'll find it better nor ye may think.**"

She said no more. A fresh weight of sorrow had been added to her already fearful load. Taught, from her earliest recollections to fear and hate the red-men, she found herself now condemned to a life in their very midst.

For a moment she thought seriously of attempting flight, but then she realized how hopeless any such attempt would be, and rode on in silence, as her companions were apparently busy with their own thoughts.

CHAPTER V.

"TAKE YOUR CHOICE."

As they drew near the building, two or three large dogs came forth to meet them, and rent the air with loud barks of satisfaction. The dogs were followed by a woman who looked even more brutal than they, Esther could not help thinking.

Stepping out of the door, the hag—for she was worthy no more respectful name—stopped short, and gazed at the maiden with a triumphant sort of leer, which Esther could not understand, and which frightened her not a little.

The creature was tall, standing nearly six feet in height, with thin, bony limbs, almost frightful to behold. Her hair, of a dirty yellow color, was unbound, and floated about her at will. Her forehead was low and narrow. Beneath it gleamed two deep-set eyes, restless and piercing as those of a serpent. Her nose was sharp and hooked like an eagle's beak. The mouth had been wide, at some former time, but had fallen in very much, leaving two long teeth in the upper jaw which overshot the lower lip, and gave to the face much of its terribly haggish appearance. The chin was long and sharp, disfigured, in places, with coarse hairs, while from a mole upon the right cheek a bristling tuft grew forth in savage freedom.

Judging from appearances, the being must have seen nearly or quite sixty years of life. Her dress was half Indian, the other half being almost entirely wanting.

A glance from the woman to Zeph Sniffen assured Esther

that some relationship existed between them, probably that of mother and son.

The same soapy, yellow hair, the same general cast of features, the same thin, stooping forms, more strongly marked in the son, assured Esther that her first impression was not a mistake.

For fully a minute the hag stood regarding the young woman without speaking, and then Zeph rode up, asking, in a loud tone:

"Wal, old woman, how d'ye like yer darter?"

"She'll dew!" was the unconcerned reply.

Esther gazed at the speakers as though spell-bound.

"This is yer mother, my gal," Carroll said, riding alongside Esther, and pointing to the repulsive-looking being before them.

"Not my mother," the maiden gasped; and then she quickly added: "you told me my mother was killed by the Indians."

"So she was, gal. But she had a resurrection afterward—that is, I found another widder, and married her, so your home wouldn't be so lonesome when I did find yer!"

There was a leer, a gloating exultation in the speaker's manner, such as the maiden had not observed there before. It no longer needed any further assurance to convince her that she was being victimized, and yet she scarcely knew in what manner.

"Father," she said, turning sharply upon him, "if you *are* indeed my father, why have you deceived me thus? You represented to me that you lived in a pleasant region, alone, and now you bring me to this place, and call it a home! Mr. Dennison, poor but good man, endeavors to come with me, and your "friend" here murders him! Why is this?"

Carroll was visibly startled by these sharp assertions, but he affected to give them no particular attention, merely glancing at the repulsive woman who stood before him, and remarking:

"You see, Moll, your new darter don't take to ye over and abovely!"

The hag laughed spitefully, and then hissed out:

"Maybe she fancies me *now* more nor she will *sometime*."

The two men had now dismounted, and Zeph Sniffen came

toward her with the evident purpose of assisting her to alight. Anticipating his intention, Esther quickly wheeled her horse, and sprung to the ground before he could reach her side.

"I was goin' tew help ye," he said, a trifle angry.

"I didn't need any of your help," was the quick response.

"I'll warrant if it had been that Will Wilder ye'd hev waited for him—"

The poltroon did not finish his words, for Esther struck him full in the face with all the strength which she could command. He staggered back several paces before exclaiming:

"You're mighty independent, I take it!"

"More so nor she will be long," the being whom Carroll had addressed as Moll returned.

"Not if I live!" said the spirited girl, in tones unmistakable.

"I am afraid my gal will not make a very good impression," the father said, endeavoring to speak persuasively.

"By thunder," the young man said, "she has made a good impression upon the side of my face!"

A half-dozen Indians were now approaching, and their presence interrupted the scene, which promised to become tragic. They conferred with Carroll for a moment, and then that personage turned to Moll.

"Medicine-woman," he said, "your services are wanted in the village. A brave is sick, and the skill of his people gives him no relief."

The woman entered the dwelling, but immediately reappeared with a few bundles of herbs, and bent her steps in the direction of the forest, beyond which the Indian village lay.

The Indians remained a few minutes, gazing at the newcomer, and when she turned to enter the house they very slowly sauntered away.

The house was quite large, but contained no floor save a rude paving of wooden blocks, and no ceiling save the rough and loose roof of bark.

Near the ground the building was divided into three apartments; but after rising some six feet the partitions suddenly ceased, and above that all was open and unconfined.

The chimney was built at the extreme end of the largest apartment, of mud and sticks, and in the capacious fire-place

a handful of wood was burning lazily. A villainous-smelling decoction was simmering in an iron kettle above it, which Esther had no desire to examine very closely.

"Here is your room," the father said, pulling aside the buffalo-skin which covered the entrance to one of the apartments; "that ye kin hev for yer own."

The maiden entered, taking her rifle and the little stock of clothing she had brought, and when she had disposed of them, she sunk upon the unpromising couch, and gave way to many bitter reflections. She did not weep—such was not her nature; but a strange sensation of choking came up in her throat as she compared the repulsive place in which she found herself, and which she supposed was henceforth to be her home, with the pleasant, tidy cabin where she had passed so many years of her life in the society of the good old scout, and the mysteries and suspicions which arose—how distressing they were whenever her thoughts turned toward them! Had some dreadful deception been practiced upon her? Was Carroll not her father? He had offered no real *proof* that he was what he claimed to be. Any person, aware of her early history, could have put forth the same representations. Then she tried to think that all must be right, and only to regret that she had found her father so unworthy.

Two weeks passed, though not very rapidly. Esther had learned several things which had excited her somewhat, though none of them had surprised her very much, after her first introduction to the scene.

One unpleasant fact was that her father was a renegade, who had joined his fortunes with the Thanktouwanna Dacotah Indians, and become a leader and councilor among them. His present wife, Moll Carroll, was a medicine-woman in the tribe when he entered it, and her son, Zeph, was living with her. The Indians regarded Moll with great esteem, and to secure influence with them, Carroll had taken her to his lodge according to Thanktouwanna custom.

Moll's sympathies, evidently, were entirely with the people of her adoption, and now that Esther could, in some manner, supply her place in the home, nearly all her time was passed in the Indian village, which was not more than two hundred yards away. Esther rather preferred this arrangement, since

her father and Zeph were away much of the time, and she was enabled to keep the dwelling more tidy, and prepare the simple and frequently not very abundant food in a manner much more palatable to those who devoured it, as well as to herself.

One fact annoyed her very much, and that was the persistency with which Zeph forced his attentions upon her. Although he had never expressed his intentions in words, they were quite too manifest to be mistaken, and Esther often pondered in her mind how she could most effectually rid herself of his persecutions. At heart she despised him, and yet, when she reflected upon her situation, knowing that her father approved the suit and urged on the suitor, terrible misgivings would come over her, and a dreadful doom seemed about to close upon her. Sometimes she thought of attempting flight, but as often did she remember the terrible obstacles which must be encountered. For a hundred miles, at least, her route must lay directly through the Indian country, and far beyond that no settlements of white men would afford her protection. Brave as she was by nature, her soul shrunk from making the attempt.

Her father generally had treated her with kindness, though there was ever present a coldness and sternness of deportment, which repelled instead of attracting her confidence. However much he might regard her, in his own peculiar way, it was evident that the place she occupied in his heart was secondary to his own will and pleasure.

The consummation she had expected came at length. One day her father entered the house when all else were absent, and after closing the door, although it was a very warm summer day, seated himself near her.

"How does Esther like her new home?" he asked, in a more affectionate tone than he had used for some days.

"I *try* to like it," she replied, frankly.

"But do not succeed very well," the father added, completing the sentence. "Will you tell me why? Perhaps we can make it pleasanter for you."

"You know very well, father," she said, after a momentary silence, "that I do not like Zeph, yet he persecutes me constantly. I shall come to *hate* him, dreadfully, soon."

"But Zeph means well ; perhaps you don't know what he means."

"I believe he means to persecute me. What other object *can* he have?"

"He has another, very different. Zeph helped me search for you many long years, and now we have found you he is dead in love with you, and wishes to marry you!"

For a moment Esther sat in silence, and then replied, very calmly :

"Well, he can take it out in waiting ; he never will marry me!"

The father did not seem at all surprised at the declaration, but continued :

"I see you don't fancy him. Maybe ye'd prefer to marry somebody else. Thar's one more that's asked me for ye, and quite possibly ye'd prefer that one."

"And who is *he*?"

"Tha-ma-hou, the young chief!"

"Worse and worse!"

"Then you'd prefer Zeph?"

"No, I wouldn't. If I had to take one of them I'd prefer the Indian."

"Very well, you kin take yer choice, but *one of 'em you must marry!*"

The girl sprung to her feet ; the father did the same.

"What is that you say?" she demanded, with flashing eye.

"That you must marry *one of those two men!*" was the emphatic answer.

"And I tell you *I never will!*" the maiden responded, with equal determination.

"You can take your choice, but one of the two it must be, if I have to compel you to it!"

"You compel me!" the maiden exclaimed, turning upon him a glance before which he perceptibly quailed ; "I'd like to know how you expect me to marry a man I detest!"

"I shall find a way, if need be!" he hissed. "You are my darter, and you must act like one. I hate to lose ye from my own house, but I'm under obligations to these two men, and I can't put 'em both off. They'll both be here this

evenin'. Then take yer choice—make up yer mind, and tell me in the mornin'."

"I can just as well tell you now, because I shall never—"

The maiden chanced to glance at the opening which served as a window. A moment her gaze remained fixed, and then she sunk into a seat, leaving her sentence unfinished. A deep pallor overspread her face, and for a moment she seemed upon the point of fainting.

Carroll looked quickly around, but he saw nothing.

"What was it, Esther?" he demanded, sternly; "what did you see to make you act so strange?"

"Wait a moment; I can't think now," the maiden said, covering her face with her hands. "I'll tell you when I think—you ought to know."

CHAPTER VI.

A NIGHT ADVENTURE.

FOR some minutes the distressed girl sat thus, and then she raised her head, and looked around quickly. But she saw nothing unusual now.

Carroll had stood there utterly perplexed at the maiden's mood. Why she acted thus, or what she had seen he could not imagine. He saw nothing, though he looked about, and even went to the window.

"What is the matter?" he asked, when she finally appeared calm.

"Nothing," was the quick reply.

"What did you see?"

"Nothing of any account."

"But you did; you said I ought to know, and you'd tell me."

"I told you nothing of the kind. I said I'd tell you when I thought you ought to know; and as that time hasn't come yet I shall say nothing more about it."

Carroll was enraged beyond all measure. He saw at once

that the girl had completely outwitted him, and if any person had been lurking in the vicinity plenty of time had been gained for him to escape to the woods. Taking down his rifle he rushed to the door, and passed completely around his house on the outside. But he saw no signs of any intruder, and returned to the apartment yet more deeply mystified than before.

"Look here, gal," he said, advancing toward her with a threatening air, "I want to know what you mean? If you saw any thing or anybody that does not belong about here, I want you to let me know."

The maiden rose slowly to her feet, and as she did so remarked, in a strange tone:

"What monstrous spectacle do you suppose I could have seen, at that window? Possibly it might have been one of my mother's murderers, or one of my *prospective husbands*! No civilized beings come here, unless it be as victims, or like myself to be deceived and persecuted!"

The father was terribly enraged, and would have struck the brave girl had he dared. But, as it was, he merely told her to think over what he had said, and be prepared to make her choice that evening. Then, with a rifle upon his shoulder, he left the cabin, making his way toward the Indian village.

When he was gone, Esther moved to the windows and looked forth, with the most intense interest depicted upon her features. She scrutinized all the clearing about the cabin, and even the forest, closely, but seemed disappointed when the survey was ended.

She threw herself dejectedly upon a seat, and then walked to the door, a moment later.

"I could have sworn I saw Will Wilder's face at the window," she mused. "Yet I must have been mistaken, for why would *he* come here? Then, had it really been he, he could not have vanished in a moment. So it must have been a mistake."

Still she could not drive the idea from her mind. She certainly had seen a face rise quickly, glance in, and then disappear. The features, too, were those of Will. She was certain of it, for she had recognized his favorite cap even before his head came into view.

But, if it had been Will in person, where had he gone so quickly? The dogs were away, one having gone with Moll and the other with her promising son, so that it would have been possible for a person to approach the house and leave it again undetected. But then it was broad daylight, and no one with any object in view which might be dangerous would be likely to run the risk.

Really Esther was quite as much exercised in her mind as her father had been, and waited with impatience for the coming of night. She believed if Will had been there he would return again that night, and communicate with her. If he did not do so she should feel convinced that the whole vision was an optical delusion.

When evening came it was rather dark, and seemed to give promise of a storm. Esther was rather rejoiced at this state of affairs. If she had any friends in the vicinity, (for she could no longer count those with whom she lived such,) the darkness would favor them; and then there were other wild thoughts running through her head which we can not give here.

Zeph Sniffen was at home early, and continued to persecute Esther as usual by his unpleasant attentions. But he gained no favor. Instead of that, now that the maiden knew what his purposes were, she was more fully than ever resolved never to wed him, not even to save her life. She was not one of the class that submit their own determinations to another's will, and even though she recognized her father's authority, she did not believe he had any right to entail a life of misery upon her.

Tha-ma-hou, the young chief, came soon after dark, stalking in as though he was really chief of the white persons as well, and engaged in conversation with Carroll for some time. This gave Esther an opportunity to note his appearance more closely than she had previously done, and she scanned him with an intense interest.

Tha-ma-hou was one of the lesser chiefs of the tribe—a young man, but of skill in the chase, and standing high among his brethren for courage and ability. He was tall, straight as an arrow, and though not very heavy in build, his supple frame was one mass of cords and muscles. None of his tribe

could compete with him in trials of strength and skill, and it would have been dangerous for any to excel him, as Thama-hou was very jealous of his physical power. There was nothing particularly handsome or noble in his physical appearance, though he was vastly superior to the majority of his people in that respect, as in others.

Esther could see his eyes wandering toward her, often, and she did not like their bold, admiring expression. Neither did Zeph. It was plain that a deep, if unspoken, rivalry had sprung up between the two, and were she to accept either, the maiden saw that the end would not be reached without bloodshed. But, it was not the fear of provoking a strife which caused her to heartily detest them both. She loathed and despised them for what they were, and realized how much preferable even a horrible death would be to a life joined with either of them.

Quite unable to bear their presence longer, she rose, and stole away to the corner which she designated as her room, and throwing herself upon the couch, began to consider what course she should next pursue. She was fully determined not to become the wife of either, but how to avoid it was not so easily settled.

Just as she had commenced thinking, a little rattling and a whisper from the side of the building near her attracted her attention.

"Esther!"

She knew the tones of that whisper—knew that her vision of the afternoon was a reality, and that Will Wilder was near! She moved very carefully toward the spot from which the call proceeded, but before she reached it, the sounds were repeated:

"Esther, are you here?"

"Yes, I am here. Is it you, Will?" she whispered back.

"Of course."

"How did you come?"

"No matter now. Do you want to stay here or go back again?"

"Can I go back to father Dennison? Where is he?"

"Don't you know why he didn't come with you?"

"No; tell me."

"He did not come because those who brought you away—"

The voice ceased in the midst of a sentence, and Esther fancied she heard a movement outside. She moved a little one side quickly, that she might not be in danger should there be any evil design on foot, and then waited to see what developments were to take place.

Just as she moved there was a short bark, a rush and bound, and she knew that her friend was struggling in the jaws of one of the fierce hounds. A second bark answered the first, and even above the sharp struggle close at hand, she could hear the quick bounds of the second dog, as he came to the assistance of his companion.

How her heart rose in her throat! She did not think it possible for any man to contend successfully with the two great brutes. As the second dog reached the spot, she heard a fierce struggle, then a fall, and she knew only too well that her friend had been overpowered. The deep, harsh growling of the dogs, as though they were shaking the life out of something, sent an awful chill of horror to her heart.

It was broken by a pistol-shot, followed almost immediately by a second. The growling changed quickly to a sharp yell of pain, which died out in a moment.

At the same time a great commotion was raised in the outer apartment, and Esther knew that, if Will had escaped the hounds, he was in most imminent peril from the inmates of the building. She knew that a moment might be worth untold gold to him, and her only desire was that he might gain time for his flight.

Grasping her rifle she rushed to the outer apartment, just as her father and his companions had gained their weapons and were about seeking the open air. Springing in advance of them she fumbled some time at the fastenings of the door, leaving them, when she was finally pushed aside, quite as strong as she had found them.

"Esther, go back!" her father exclaimed, savagely.

"Not till I know what all this tumult means," she returned, decidedly. "If I am in danger of being shot in my bed by some miserable prowler, I want to know about it."

Finding that he could not drive her back, Carroll was obliged

to allow her to accompany them. With weapons ready for use at a moment's warning, the party crept silently toward the place from which the shots had proceeded.

Something was struggling on the ground convulsively, but whether dog or man Esther could not determine. She dreaded to know the result, as Tha-ma-hou crept up to the spot. She was next, holding her weapon with nervous hands, determined to save her friend, if he should need her assistance, or perish with him.

The young chief bent over the struggling object, and then raised his body, saying, in very imperfect English :

"You two dog kill!"

A furious exclamation broke from Carroll and Zeph, and they hastened to satisfy themselves that Tha-ma-hou was correct. There could be no mistake. One had the throat terribly cut, the head being almost severed from the body, and the other was giving his last struggles, having been shot through the heart.

There were no signs of the daring man who had committed the deed. However much he had been injured in the struggle, he had taken himself away.

Esther entered the house, well satisfied at the turn affairs had taken thus far, though she had still very many fears in regard to the result.

Tha-ma-hou immediately sounded a signal, and his braves, who had heard the pistols and were already upon the alert, came scampering to the spot by scores. At least fifty speedily assembled, and under the direction of their chief, dispersed to scour the vicinity.

Carroll and Zeph Sniffen remaining in the house, waited impatiently for the bringing in of the daring rascal who had inflicted such a loss upon them—confident that he could not escape.

But, after an hour's search, the last Indian came in, none other than the young chief himself, who declared that nothing could be done until morning, at which time he would make all possible efforts to discover the marauder.

With a comparatively happy heart, Esther returned to her corner, and prepared to rest, for it was very doubtful if sleep would be possible after the events of the evening.

CHAPTER VII.

A WOMAN STRIKES.

SURELY Esther had food enough for thought ! The strange position in which she found herself—a victim in the hands of villains, though she knew not their purpose—betrayed by the man she had supposed to be her true father—in danger of losing her life, or all that would make existence endurable, which was worse—well could she lie there and think, during the long hours, of the strange web of circumstances which surrounded her.

But, the adventure of the night had given her a fresh theme. The young man whom she had parted from with so much sorrow, though she could not then have said positively that she loved him, had followed her to this place, where she so much needed a friend, and risked his life that he might learn something of her situation.

What more would come ? The near future was unquestionably full of events. What would be their nature ? Should she be sacrificed ?—would her young life end, even as it rounded out into the fullness of early womanhood ? Or, would Will—

She paused, and her thoughts ceased when she heard a faint scraping noise, which seemed to come from the very place whence Will had addressed her, two or three hours previous. It ceased, almost at once. She left her couch and carefully approached the spot, only a yard distant. Just as she reached it the sound was repeated, and this time she had no doubt as to the cause.

"Who's there ?" she whispered, very low, for she knew not how many sharp ears might be listening.

"Only Will," was the equally gentle reply.

"You must be very careful ; you would be killed, if caught," she continued.

"I know it ; but they won't catch me !"

"Did the dogs hurt you ?" Esther continued.

"They did bite me a trifle, but not very severely. But say, Esther, are you alone?"

"I am; say on."

"Don't you want to leave here and go back home with me?"

"When?"

"To-night, or any time."

"I must leave this place," she said, with a little hesitation; but, we can do nothing to-night. Early in the morning a sharp hunt will be made for you, and if you are not far away and securely hidden you will be found."

"No danger of my being found. I have a snug hiding-place some ten miles from here, where I suspicion no danger from the Indians. I shall be there before daylight, and if you think best will wait there for your coming. What do you think? Can you get as far as that alone, some time?"

The maiden reflected for a moment, and then replied:

"Very likely I may, in two or three days. But, how shall I find you?"

"I'll tell you. Go about due east till you strike a creek, follow up the stream for about a mile, or until you see a tall, dead pine to the left, near the top of a rocky hill. If it be daylight, I shall see you; if not, follow the direction given by a pine stick which will be lying at the foot of the tree, and when you have gone ten rods, call my name. I shall hear you."

Esther repeated the directions given, and when assured that she had them correctly, she continued:

"I must leave this place. All here are my enemies, or rather they care nothing for me, my father being in league with the rest. I think sometimes I was only brought here to be sacrificed. But they shall never succeed; I will die first."

"Good! glorious! I admire your spunk! Give them the slip soon as you can, and we'll go back to the old home."

"Fly! fly!" whispered Esther; "you are discovered!"

She had not been aware that a tall, lank form had drawn itself up to the partition, and peered over, noticing, in the almost perfect darkness, the barely discernible outlines of Esther, as she crouched beside the wall. But, she heard a stealthy hand fumbling at the fastenings of the outer door, and gave

the alarm in a moment, knowing only too well that by some means a knowledge or suspicion of Will's presence had been obtained.

It was Zeph Sniffen who crept forth thus, and with rifle at full cock, peered around the corner of the building, fully intending to blow somebody into eternity in a moment.

To his surprise, nobody was there, nor did there seem any indications of any person having been there. Zeph bent low and listened and waited, keeping a sharp look-out upon all sides, but finally felt satisfied that no one was present, and sullenly reëntered the dwelling.

Naturally it would have seemed that Esther would sleep but little after an evening so fraught with adventures, but the knowledge that a friend was near seemed to give her additional confidence and security, so that she fell into a sound sleep, from which she did not awake until the sun was well up in the morning.

Esther learned that a strong force of the Indians, accompanied by Zeph and Tha-ma-hou, had set forth for the purpose of discovering the nocturnal disturber of the previous evening. Carroll remained at home, swearing over the loss of his dogs, which were very valuable to him, compared with the worthless, half-starved Indian curs which swarmed around on all hands.

"Now, Esther," her father said, soon after her appearance, "you know who was here last night, and I want you to tell me. The Dacotahs have gone out in full force, and they'll be about sartin to bring him in. If it's any of *your* friends what hev follered us off here I want to know it."

"You will, if the Indians bring in anybody," was the calm reply.

"Oh, I see yer determined tew be obstinate," he shouted fiercely. "I'll cure ye of that purty soon. It's a pity if my own gal is goin' tew overrun me in my house. Will you tell me who was about here last night?"

"No. I would not tell you if I knew."

The girl spoke bravely, but she realized at the same time how helpless she was in reality.

"Jest as well. Now, p'r'aps you'll tell me which of them two men you intend to marry."

"Neither of them, as I told you yesterday."

Carroll's face fairly blazed with anger.

"And I told you you would!" he thundered. Then, in a hissing tone, he continued:

"Here in this land it takes no great ceremony tew make a match. *To-morrer mornin' ye'll be glad tew call yerself* **SOME BODY'S WIFE!** It'll be the fust one of 'em that asks me. 'Now ye know it, and there ain't goin' to be any more foolin' around about this thing. You are to mind me!"

Esther was but a woman, albeit a very brave and self-possessed one. It was no wonder that before this dreadful declaration she should quail, and shudder, while her pale face grew even more pallid.

"Father," she said, in tones strangely unlike those she had used before, "you have not told me why this sacrifice must be made. You say that I am your daughter—that you searched for me long years, and now that I am found you wish to throw me away at once upon these repulsive beings. Why not, if I am your child, and ought to love you and do your bidding, why not tell me the necessity of all this?"

Carroll looked perplexed. He did not reply for a moment, and then he said:

"I can't tell ye now. But you mind me, and it'll come out all right."

Esther retired to her room, if such it could be called, and tried to think. She had not calculated upon being driven so closely, else she would have made an attempt at flight the previous night. Her chances for escape now looked very small, certainly. The forest far and near was alive with Indians, and her only hope that they would come in before night involved Will's capture, almost equivalent to his death.

So she could only wait and hope the long day through, glad at each hour to see returning braves, and hear their report that nothing could be found of any white man or stranger.

As the afternoon wore away she became almost desperate. Not the least chance of escape presented, and it really seemed as though the dreadful fate with which she had been threatened was certainly to be visited upon her.

She had looked for an opportunity of conveying her rifle

and ammunition outside, where she could obtain it in case any opportunity for flight presented itself, but she had been jealously watched all day, and every move made was under espionage.

Still she had found a chance to secure a short iron bolt, which she had placed in her dress, ready for use in case of urgent need. Come what would, she was determined not to submit till the last effort at resistance had been made and proved in vain.

Evening shades had fallen; savages had been plenty about the cabin during the afternoon, but now all were gone save Tha-ma-hou, and Esther well knew the object for which he remained. The only light of the place came from a small lamp, which burned feebly upon the rough, hewn table.

The young Indian chief sat near Carroll; Zeph and his mother were together in another part of the room, and Esther sat near the table. The lovely, pleasing expression had all gone from her face now, and in its stead she wore a look of sternness and determination ill-befitting her beautiful features.

Zeph glanced at her often with a triumphant expression which she found no difficulty in understanding, and the embarrassed air of Carroll, as he sat beside Tha-ma-hou, would have been an additional proof, had such been required, that she was to be given to the white man.

Presently the chief bent over and spoke some words to Carroll in a low tone. As he did so the latter arose, and both moved together from the cabin. Outside their voices could be heard in earnest speech, but Esther had no time to listen, for movements inside demanded her attention.

When the Indian and Carroll left the room, Zeph arose and approached the maiden.

"Come," he said, in not very energetic tones.

"Where?"

"You know we're man and wife now," he said. "I've made that bargain with yer father, so I want ye to come with me."

He grasped the hand which was next to him, and as she arose from the block upon which she had been sitting, he led her away. She did not resist; her purpose was too deep and

firm for that. Now or never she felt that her freedom must be secured.

They had taken but two or three steps, when she stopped suddenly. Zeph turned, but before he could throw his arms about her, as he intended, and bear her from the room, she raised the bolt, which she had taken from its hiding-place, and struck him upon the head with all her strength.

The long-limbed brute tumbled to the floor with a hollow groan, and the next moment the room was in midnight darkness. Esther had stepped to the table and extinguished the light.

Moll uttered a cry, and sprung to the spot where she first saw the girl, but she was not there. At the instant of extinguishing the lamp, she had turned and glided toward the door, still keeping her weapon in readiness for instant use.

It was well that she did so, for, on passing through the door, she encountered her father, who was just entering. The shock nearly threw him down, though he grasped Esther and maintained his hold.

"Hello, what's this?" he demanded.

He did not immediately learn what it was. The maiden was excited and desperate. Had she paused to reflect she might have done differently. But as it was she quickly raised her iron, which had already done her good service, and gave her unnatural father a companion blow to that she had already dealt Zeph.

He fell without a groan, and as she felt his hold relax, she sprung away, shaping her course toward the forest. Not till she reached the shelter of the wood did she pause for a moment, and then not long. She heard a commotion about the house, heard an alarm given, and knew that very soon the Indians would be upon her trail.

Her thoughts flew distractedly from one question to another. First she asked herself if there could be any possibility of her escape; and before she could even make a reasonable surmise, she found herself wondering if she had killed either of the men she had struck. She hoped not; she would have felt sadly pained to know that either of them must die; yet she did not regret the blows.

The stars were shining but feebly, a few in the western

heavens only giving any light upon the darksome earth. Yet these were sufficient to show her the course she should pursue, and having settled this in her mind, she started forward again.

Ere she had gone far, the sounds of pursuit reached her ears, and she knew that a short time would decide whether she was immediately recaptured or escaped for the time being. Giving little heed to brambles and bushes, logs and stones, she hurried ahead as fast as she could penetrate the wilderness, only glancing back occasionally to see that she maintained a proper direction.

CHAPTER VIII.

ALL IN VAIN.

ESTHER soon found that she could not maintain the rapid pace at which she had set forth. When the excitement of the moment ceased, and she began to toil along after having passed beyond the sound of her pursuers' voices, she commenced to realize the immensity of the task she had undertaken.

Finally she came upon the site of a deserted Indian village, and here she paused to rest. Already was she bruised and sore, her clothing sadly torn, and she felt extremely weary. Yet she had traveled but about a mile—nine more remained before she could hear a friendly voice—hundreds before she should reach safety. The thought was enough to have quite discouraged one less determined, but, despite these discouragements, she only waited a few minutes, and then pushed forward again.

She now struck an old trail, and though she could see nothing through the intense darkness, the way felt quite smooth and easy to her feet. It ran, too, very nearly in the direction she wished to take, so she cautiously followed it.

Thus she traveled for an hour, when the trail divided, one branch going nearly south, the other north-east, as she supposed the points of the compass to lie. She looked back to

see if the stars confirmed her supposition, but found that the clouds had overcast them all, so that it was impossible to decide which way was right or which wrong.

What should she do? There was the trail which she had been following—possibly it had led her thus far in the way she wished to go, possibly not. There was no means by which she could determine. But here it ended, and neither of the branches led in that direction. Should she follow either of them? If so, which? Or should she strike once more into the tangled forest?

Unable to decide, and sorely perplexed, the maiden threw herself upon the ground, and gave way to a bitter flood of tears. When they ceased, and she rose to her feet again, she was somewhat calmer, though none the less undecided.

"I dare not go further," she said, finally, "for I may go directly from the place I wish to reach, and into even greater danger than there is here. Why not stay where I am? I must be nearly three miles from *that* place, and that will give me an opportunity to start well in the morning, as they will not be likely to do much to-night. I can start as early as they. I can lay my way due east then, and when I find *him*, *he* can tell me what to do—he can give me protection."

How her confidence rested in Will Wilder! Even though he came alone, far into the midst of the Indian country, where discovery would be almost equivalent to death, she felt that in his presence she should be safe, that all her anxiety and care would end. Surely but one passion in the world could have blinded her thus!"

She moved away a short distance, and finding a dry, retired place beneath a wide-spreading pine tree, threw herself wearily down. In a few minutes she was asleep, and her repose lasted for several hours.

She awoke with a start, for it seemed some great danger was upon her, but when she had looked around, every thing seemed as quiet as when she had laid herself down. There were no signs of dawn, though the clouds had broken away, and stars were shining in some parts of the heavens, quite brilliantly.

Her mind given up to thoughts and conjectures, Esther remained beneath the tree what seemed an interminable time.

She was anxious to be up and away, but could not make the attempt till the coming of day should enable her to select the proper route.

At length she saw that in what seemed to be the north, the stars began to pale away, and the gray light of dawn took their place. Satisfied this must really be east, she rose and made her first steps forward, much refreshed by her long rest, and with renewed anticipations, although bodily somewhat sore and pained from the bruises she had received during the first part of her flight.

Presently the sun came up, and the birds came forth with songs, as though to cheer her on her difficult way.

Her heart caught fresh inspiration. Before her lay freedom and happiness. What was the cost, even though the difficulties were much greater, compared with the reward she would obtain?

Sometimes she looked back, fearing pursuit, but no indication of danger cast a cloud over her happy spirits. She turned to the left to avoid a stream she could not cross, and finally, when it seemed she must have passed the object of her search, she came to a smaller creek which emptied into it.

"This is the stream of which he spoke," she said to herself. "Up-stream—to the left. I can not see it; but, oh, I must be near the spot!"

She trembled beneath the flood of happy emotions which swept over her. It scarcely seemed, even now, that a mile or two more would bring her to the spot where—

Oh, how joyful her anticipations were as she thought of that spot!

The character of the country, too, was rocky and wild, just as she had supposed would be the case. She was right at last!

Soon she began to scan every eminence carefully in search of the dry pine, pushing forward meantime as fast as possible.

Presently the tall spire of dead branches met her sight, and forgetting all caution, and unheeding her fatigue, she ran directly toward it. Up the rather sharp ascent she hurried, looking about for Will, though heavy rocks shut out much of her view. She even stood beside the dry tree, and yet she had not seen him.

Recollecting the pine stick, of which he had spoken, she looked for it, and found that it pointed toward a wild, rocky glen not far away.

Even as she hastened toward the spot a dark suspicion rose in her mind that something might have occurred to prevent Will from reaching the place. As the idea rose in her mind, she came to a large rock. Here she paused, and leaned against it heavily.

"Will," she said, "Will, are you here?"

There was no audible reply, but the maiden heard a movement, as of some one emerging from a narrow aperture in the rocks.

With no suspicion of the truth in her mind, she turned quickly, to encounter, not Will Wilder, but the *haggish features of Moll Carroll!*

Notwithstanding all the fortitude that Esther had hitherto exhibited, she was utterly struck dumb with amazement and consternation now. Behind the old hag she could see an Indian face, and knowing how useless it would be, she made no resistance, while the terrible being pounced upon her, and grasped both her arms.

"Ah, me fine gal," Moll said, "ye find ye don't leave so easy! It's pesky nice to hev fellers a-hangin' round, and run off to try to meet 'em in the woods; but it don't allus work. We've got the both of ye safe this time; and while *they* take keer of him, *I'll* see to you!"

She pointed backward toward the place from which she had emerged, and chuckled with intense satisfaction as she finished her sentence, griping her hand upon Esther's arm till it seemed the long fingers would meet through the flesh.

But the maiden felt no pain. Her interest in the fate of Will was too absorbing to allow any other thoughts at the moment.

"Where is Will?" she asked.

"Wouldn't ye like to know?" her tormentor hissed. "Maybe ye'd like to know that he's *right in there*, whar ye come to see him, but ye can't! Or maybe ye'd like to know what killed him, and when 'twas!"

Esther quickly tore her arm from the grasp of the hag, and produced her apology for a weapon.

"You do not tell me that he is dead—that you killed him?" she exclaimed; "you dare not tell me that!"

"Maybe he ain't dead now; I dont think he is," the woman replied, deliberately. "But if *he ain't*, he'd give a great deal *to be*! What do ye think of that?"

Whetebr Esther would have thrown herself upon the hag, and attempted to strike her to the earth, is a matter of doubt. Evidently the savage standing behind her thought there might be danger of such a consummation, for he grasped the maiden's arms, and wrenched away the iron bolt.

Moll took it from his hand, and examined it curiously.

"So this was the thing ye struck Zeph with," she hissed. "It's a wonder ye didn't kill him; ye come near tew it."

"I'm only sorry I did not strike harder," the maiden returned.

The hag glared at her a moment, and seemed tempted to use the offending bolt upon her head in turn.

"Don't yer say no more sech words as that. Yer speakin' of my son, and he ain't to blame for bein' it, neither. Then ye struck yer father, too. A purty dutiful darter *you* are. Jest because ye thought yer knew better than them that war older."

"He knew better," the girl exclaimed, vehemently. "I told him I would never marry Zeph, or live as his wife, and *I never will!*"

"Ah-ha!" the crone sneered. "P'raps ye'd like tew crow now! Ye'll start right back home along with me, and we'll *see* whether ye will or not. The boy has got the headache, no doubt, but he'll be glad to see ye, for all that!"

"But I came here to see Will, and now I want to see him," Esther persisted.

She had no idea the request would be granted, but she wished to gain time, in hopes that something would transpire in her favor.

"Yer want tew see him, dew yer?" the hag demanded. "Well, I don't mind if ye dew hev a chance to say good-by, for these young lovers are allus drefful soft on the partin' question! Bring him up!"

The last sentence was given in a louder tone, and presently three Indians appeared, escorting Will Wilder. The young

man's arms were bound, his face and clothing bloody, and garments torn, showing plainly that he had met with some severe struggles since his coming into the Indian country.

"My poor Esther," he said, on beholding her, "I am sorry for this, on your account. I meant to have helped you, but I'm afraid it's all up now."

"Take him down!" the hag exclaimed, in a rage. "We don't want any preachin' here; we ain't meetin'-goin' folks. I'm goin' hum now with the gal. Weasel will go along with me. When I'm gone do you see to that feller so he'll not trouble us any more in time to come."

The braves expressed their satisfaction at the command, and when they had taken Will back again into the cavern, the old woman turned to Esther:

"Now, my gal," she exclaimed, "you can stay here and see what they're goin' to dew with him, or go with me, jest as ye like."

The poor maid had no wish to see torture or death, if Will was to be the victim, and as it was evident that she must submit, she exclaimed:

"I shall go with you, of course; but if any harm comes to him, mark you, I shall demand his blood at your hands!"

The fiendish woman recoiled before the fierce gaze of the determined maiden, though she laughed a hollow, bitter laugh as they moved away from the spot.

"So ye think to scare *me*, do ye—one that's lived among the Thanktouwannas as long as I have!"

"You have triumphed now," was the reply, "but there may come another day. I tell you again, if harm comes to Will, woe be to you!"

Weak and almost famished, the trembling maiden found little rest and no food till they drew near the Dacotah village.

There they were met by Tha-ma-hou, up-a whose face sat a sullen scowl.

CHAPTER IX.

WILL WILDER.

WE left Wil. Wilder at home, in the village, near scout Dennison's cabin, with no intention on his part of leaving the place during his natural lifetime. But, suddenly, the young man appears in the heart of the Thanktouwanna country, transformed from the peaceful farmer lad, who sometimes hunted wild animals by way of change, to the daring scout, who was certainly very fortunate, if not skillful, in having thus far escaped the lynx-eyed savages.

When Carroll and his daughter rode on in advance, they left Dan busily engaged on the girth, and Zeph standing behind, watching the operations. In a few minutes the repairs were all made, and the old scout assumed an upright position, saying as he did so:

"Thar, my lad, ye'll find yer girt is all right now, but I wouldn't advise ye to live much longer in these parts afore ye l'arn how to fix one of the simplest parts of yer hoss-trappin's!"

"See here, old man, I don't want any *preachin'* from you!" was the fierce exclamation. "Besides, this ain't half fixed, with all yer blowin'. See this!"

And placing his foot in the stirrup, he made a motion as though to mount, which had the effect of breaking the girth again.

"Call that mended, do ye?" he demanded, fiercely.

The old scout hastened to the spot again, and bent over the mended work. The cause of the failure was apparent in a moment.

"Look-a-here, youngster," he exclaimed, indignantly, "nobody can mend any sich thing, so but ye kin *cut* it apart. Ye kin fix it up now to suit yerself."

He turned to mount his horse, half inclined to chastise the young man for the scaly trick, which he could in no manner understand. But the latter called after him.

"See here, old man," he shouted, "you just come back here and make yer apologies for that, confound you. You lied about it!"

This was too much. The old man turned quickly, and would have wreaked vengeance upon his insulter. But as he made the movement a pistol in Zeph's hand was discharged, he saw a thousand sparks fly through the air, felt a sensation as though the whole upper portion of his head was blown off, and then all faded away, and he knew no more.

Zeph looked around quickly, fearing some one had witnessed the act, but no one was within sight. Returning his pistol, and smiling at the bloody work he had done, he bent over the fallen man. The blood was pouring from an ugly wound in his head.

"He's done for, sure enough," the murderer exclaimed. "Now to git the carkiss out of the way."

He stooped over, grasped his victim by the shoulders, and dragged the heavy body down into the ravine, pitching it over a sharp descent into a deep pool formed by a small cataract. Hastily returning to the horses, he took off the murdered man's saddle, put it upon his own beast, and struck the freed animal with a stick. The horse at once threw up its heels, and finding itself free, galloped back to the settlement from which it came.

Zeph arranged the road, so that it might not too readily betray the nature of the scene which had just transpired there, and then hurried along to join his companions as we have seen.

The horse, left to choose for itself, made its way rapidly back home, and passed, as it went a field in which Will Wilder, with heavy heart, had just commenced labor. He saw the unusual manner of the horse, gathered in a moment that something wrong had occurred, and secured the animal almost as soon as it entered its former owner's inclosure.

Waiting only to obtain his rifle, he rode rapidly back, his mind filled with agonizing fears. About half a mile short of the place where the tragedy had occurred, he came upon the body of Dan Dennison, lying prostrate in the path. Springing down, he found that the old man still lived, though very weak, and almost delirious from the effects of the wound.

After a time he expressed himself ready to make an attempt to reach home. Enduring a tedious, painful ride, he was landed in his own cabin, and the best care the settlement afforded bestowed upon him.

When he had recovered sufficiently, a consultation was held between himself and Will. First the old man related his story.

Upon being pitched into the water he almost immediately regained consciousness sufficiently to raise his head, and thus avoid drowning. In a few minutes after his would-be murderer left the place he crawled forth, and managed to stagger to the place where Will found him. Here, overcome by the pain of his wound and the efforts he had made, he fainted away.

"I'm powerful consarned for Esther," he said. "That 'ere was a trumped-up thing, done tew git me out of the way; no doubt about that. What was it for, onless so't I needn't be there to take her part when they want tew abuse her, or so't they kin dew suthin 'tarnal mean with her. And the wust of all is, I can't stir ag'in for tew or three weeks, and afore that time 'twill be tew late to find her, if any thing is wrong."

Will entertained the same fears with his old friend, and his enthusiasm in behalf of Esther speedily induced him to speak.

"Say, Dan," he exclaimed, earnestly, "I'm going after her!"

"Going arter her! What do yer mean? What can yer do?"

"I mean this," was the earnest reply. "I'll follow Esther to her new home—see if she is suited and happy there, and every thing goes right, and pick up any other news I can, and then come back and tell you."

"I'm afeard ye don't realize how much of an undertakin' that'll be," the old man said, slowly.

"Of course I don't know as well as you," Will replied; "but I'm willing to run any risk, and do what I said, or more if there be need."

"Ye allers was a mighty good hunter," the old scout answered, "and why ye can't do that as well I don't know. But if ye think of goin' thar's some hints I want tew give ye afore ye set out, in case ye happen to come in the way of any red-skins."

The young man listened attentively to the old scout until

the latter was too much exhausted to counsel him further, and then withdrew to make the simple preparations for his journey.

These were soon completed, and with a fine rifle, two reliable pistols, an article much rarer in those days than now, a knife, and a dog whose scent was never mistaken, the young man was prepared to set forth upon his first trail.

Knowing that in order to keep the trail he must pursue it during its freshness, he set forth that evening, and with the unerring sagacity of his dog to lead, was within sight of the party just as it started out next morning.

Not daring to travel much during the hours of light, he usually devoted the most of them to sleep, following the party by night, and generally overtaking them, before they started out the following morning.

But a serious mischance befell Will. His dog, during an afternoon, that on which Esther reached her home with Moll and Zeph, chanced to stray too far, and encountered a hunting party of Indians, who shot and badly wounded him. Escaping from them the brute ran to his master, and died beside him.

Will concealed the body, though his heart sunk at the loss. Unable longer to rely upon the animal's instincts, he was obliged to follow up the trail himself as he was able. He finally discovered the maiden's home, on the very afternoon when her new-found father was urging her to select a husband.

A part of the conversation the young man had overheard, and with his interest all aglow he retired to the forest in time to avoid discovery. Remaining in the vicinity till dark, he stole down, and witnessed through chinks in the log-walls, the scenes transpiring inside. At the moment when he commenced the whispered conversation with Esther, recorded in a previous chapter, the hounds, returning from a prowl, discovered him.

In the sharp conflict which ensued he was victorious, though the weapons he was forced to use nearly frustrated all his plans. He very easily avoided the imperfect pursuit the Indians were able to make in the darkness, and when all was still again stole back, hoping to speak further with Esther.

He was partially successful, though obliged to hasten away to escape Zeph. Having arranged with the maid so far as able, he returned to the cavern which he had accidentally discovered, where he passed the following day and night, undisturbed by any of the savages who prowled incessantly through the forest.

Early on the following morning, as the young man was just arousing from the light sleep which had visited his eyes, a dog rushed into his retreat. At first Will thought it might be that Esther was at hand, and yet he perceived almost instantly that the dog acted hostile. He sprung upon the young man with a sharp bark, though the latter knocked him to the ground with his rifle.

Giving a whine of pain the dog hobbled away on three legs, and Will, rather uncertain of the meaning of its visit, waited some time for its reappearance, or any movement which should clear up the mystery. Nothing serving to throw light upon the occurrence, Will drew near the entrance, and looking all about, so far as he was able, but finding everything still quiet, at length emerged from the cavern.

The instant he did so two Indians pounced upon him, bore him to the earth, and, with the assistance of two others, who joined them, disarmed him, and bound his hands. When this was done he was taken into the cavern, where the party was speedily joined by Moll Carroll, who gloated especially over the capture. After searching all about for Esther, and finding no indications of her having been there, the hag coolly sat herself down to await the maiden's coming, for she seemed to feel a perfect assurance that the girl would be there soon.

The credit of the capture was all due to old Moll. Immediately after the somewhat peculiar flight of Esther, she hastened to the Indian village, and obtained the best dog which the village contained. Four warriors had accompanied her, and their efforts conjoined with her own were sufficient to keep the dog upon the trail. By following it through the night they succeeded in finding Will's stopping place. This had been the old woman's intention, instead of following and bringing back Esther, which last could have been more easily done had the trail once been found.

Moll was satisfied that some white man had a rendezvous

in the neighborhood, and that toward it the girl would **cer-**tainly go. If she could entrap them both it would be better than to simply bring back the maiden.

As we have seen, she succeeded.

After torturing the young lovers with a sight of each other and permitting them to hear each other's voices, she hastened away with her captive, leaving three savages behind to murder Will before they should follow.

The young man was terribly enraged, as well as disappointed. He knew well that Esther would be taken back to the village and made to suffer for her attempted escape. He could no longer assist her—his doom was impending. How he strained at the cruel bonds which bound his arms, and longed for a moment of freedom that he might rush upon his husky captors, and throttle one of them with a death-grip!

The Indians, secure from interruption, and in the heart of their own country, deliberated at least an hour before they decided upon any mode of punishment. There were many means by which death could be produced, but that which combined great suffering and the most fiendish manner of producing it would be most satisfactory to the Thanktouwannas.

Evidently the party decided upon some course at length. They rose, led the prisoner to the upper air, and proceeded leisurely through the forest, looking on all hands for a **tion** to suit them.

Will racked his brains to imagine the intended mode of death. That they were looking for a place adapted to their purposes was very apparent, as they paused often to consult, but as often proceeded. If they intended to torture him with fire they had passed an abundance of places, and hanging was not an Indian mode of execution.

At length they stopped, and after surveying the relative positions of two saplings, seemed to decide upon the spot. One of the trees was bent over, and then allowed to spring back, which operation seemed highly satisfactory.

To one of the saplings Will's left leg was firmly bound, in such a manner that the foot was raised nearly half a yard from the ground. When this had been done to the entire satisfaction of the savages, the various knots having been

carefully examined, the other sapling was bent down, which could be done by the two strongest of the braves only after a struggle. The body of this, near the top, was then placed beside Will's right leg, giving him more than an inkling of their purpose. He could well conceive the terrible situation in which he should be placed, when the bent tree was allowed to resume an upright position, drawing apart his joints, and subjecting him to the most excruciating torture.

He recoiled as far as his bonds would permit, and gasped for breath, as he contemplated the utter fiendishness of the preparations. This was his first trial, and he had not acquired the stoicism and hardihood which ever come from long-continued exposure to danger of every kind. The thought of death was bad enough, when he considered all the circumstances, and the great object which he must leave unaccomplished. It pained him most of all to leave Esther in the hands of her persecutors. Even with the appliances of torture all about him, the young man felt that he could defy the ingenuity of his tormentors, could he but know that the maiden was safe again under the roof of old Dan Dennison. But, such was not the case, and at his death her last hope must perish!

Was the man less brave because, under such circumstances, he shrunk from death?

The Indians realized something of his feelings, and, as they proceeded very slowly with their work, took frequent occasion to taunt and revile the suffering victim. To this he made no reply, though his lips quivered at times, and it seemed his emotions must find expression.

The smaller sapling had been bent down, and the two Indians seated themselves upon it, while their comrade proceeded to arrange the cords.

Just at this moment the drama was interrupted. A rifle-shot, sounding fearfully near, broke upon the air. One of the Indians dropped instantly from the bent tree, which resumed its upright position, throwing the second savage some ten feet away, upon the ground. The savage in charge of Will, seeing that something was wrong, and not wishing to lose the prisoner with whom they had dallied so long, began to feel for his hatchet. Before he could produce it, however, another shot was fired, and this time he was the victim. A ball struck

him in the arm, plowing up into his shoulder, and sending him away from the spot with no further thoughts in regard to his late prisoner.

As the smoke from the report rose upon the air and mingled with the cloud which had preceded it but a moment, a white man sprung from behind a huge rock, in the vicinity, and with a wild yell rushed toward the place.

When the preparations for torture had been commenced the three savages had placed their rifles against a tree not far away. When the brave who had been thrown down by the springing up of the sapling regained his feet, he had barely time to reach them before the white man, who seemed to have every thing in the vicinity carefully noted. Both ran toward the same spot as though for life or death.

The Indian was a trifle in advance, and seized a weapon, but before he could raise the hammer one of the scout's hands was upon the barrel. Releasing one hand, the red-skin felt for his knife. The white man dropped his own rifle to the ground, and with a quick wrench tore the gun from the Indian's grasp. He had no time to fire it, however, for the savage was upon him, knife in hand.

Dropping the lately-contested gun, the white man caught the Indian's arm, and then a terrific struggle ensued. Both were large, powerful men, perfectly at home in trials of muscle and skill. Neither had any perceptible advantage. The white man was a trifle the tallest, but the Indian possessed the advantage of a ponderous frame. Each held his antagonist's right wrist with his left hand, the savage's, containing the knife, being held aloft, the hunter's pressed to his side.

Back and forth, right and left, the strong men swayed, yet neither fell. With eyes glaring fury, and compressed lips expressing the purpose of death, they struggled on. Now they were close to Will, so close that he feared they would crush him, then the tide receded, and they were several yards away.

But even such a perfectly-matched struggle must end at last. Suddenly, as though he had been carefully watching for the moment, the white man released his hold of the Indian's wrist, and at the same time tore his own hand away from the savage's grasp. The movement carried him close to the two guns which stood beside the tree, and before the Dacotah could

recover himself and spring upon his adversary again, the latter had cocked and presented a weapon.

One instant the deadly weapon was poised, and then its contents were belched into the red-man's breast. He steadied himself for a moment, gave utterance to a spasmodic yell, which died away in his throat and then sunk to the ground, dying.

The victor bent over him for a moment, as though to satisfy himself of the certainty of death, and then his sharp-glances ran through the forest till they fell upon the figure of the wounded Indian, who was now in full retreat. Without a word he dashed away in pursuit, and it was some minutes ere he returned. The stranger quickly passed beyond Will's sight, but when he came back the young man had no need to ask the result of his mission.

The man did not pause to survey Will very closely, but while he was producing his knife, to cut the late captive loose, the latter had an opportunity to scan his deliverer, which he improved.

The stranger might have seen forty years of life, more or less, though the gray with which his hair was thickly sprinkled would seem to indicate something besides age as having affected the scout. There was a peculiar, wild expression about the eyes, which might soften down into deepest kindness, or inflame to the most terrible animosity. The beard was long and heavy, leaving the eyes and nose almost the only features exposed. In frame the man was tall, fully six feet, with a well-proportioned, compactly-built, muscular form. His dress was of the most approved ranger pattern, stout and serviceable. In his belt were stuck two pistols and a knife, and he carried an exceedingly heavy double-barreled rifle.

Such, in external appearance, was the man who stopped before Will Wilder, and as he produced his knife, carelessly remarked :

"Ye watched that little squabble we hed here pretty clus, I take it."

"I certainly had good reasons for doing so," the happy Will returned.

"Yes, I suppose 'twould have made a trifle of difference with you which one of us got the best of it. But, Lord, man, that

was jest nothin'. I *hev* had some squabbles that was wuth thinkin' over arterwards!"

While thus speaking the scout had cut the young man loose, and commenced rubbing his wrists to restore the deranged circulation. As he did so, he gazed upon the preparations made for torturing the young man.

"The devils!" he exclaimed; "there's one thing consolin' about it—none of 'em 'll live to try the same thing on ag'in. If they want to pull anybody apart that way, some other head 'll hev to hatch up the idee."

"I see you are a thorough enemy of the red-men," Will remarked.

A change came over the scout's face in an instant. The playful expression of the eyes became a glare of undying hatred and ferocity.

"Young man," he said, while his breath came hard, and his teeth were close shut, "if any person on airth has cause to hate the Injins, I am that man! And if the Injins have cause to dread any white man, that man is me! For fifteen years I have been on the trail, somewhere in the country, and durin' all that time I never hev rested. If a man crossed my path, and his skin was red, *that man died if I could reach him!*"

There was such a dreadful earnestness and fury in the tones of the speaker that Will instinctively shrunk away from him. He really wished to know more of the strange being, but dared not ask him directly.

"You did a good turn for me, at any rate," he said. "But possibly you may wish to engage in another enterprise."

"Wal, tell me who you are, how ye come here, and what ye want done. My name is—no matter what it is now. The reds call me Striking Eagle, and many white men know me by the same handle."

Will had often heard of Striking Eagle, the most reckless, ferocious Indian-hunter in the country. His name always reached the settlements in connection with some terrible punishment vented upon the savages, which stories were generally of so sanguinary a nature that the man had come to be regarded rather as a myth than a human being. The very thought that he stood in the living presence of this most

redoubted scout and Indian-fighter seemed almost too much for Will's belief.

Like a sensible young man, however, he refrained from any extravagant expressions of admiration, but contented himself with giving a succinct account of Carroll's movements after his discovery of his lost daughter, and the motive which induced himself to follow them into the wilderness, with his success thus far.

Striking Eagle listened with attention to the young man's narrative, and when it was finished, exclaimed:

"Good, my boy! It's sartin the right kind of stuff is a yer, and I admire yer pluck. But at the same time I want to have jest as little to do with the wimmin-kind as possible."

Will's features elongated to a considerable extent.

"You do not, then, mean to help me further? Of course I have no claim upon you."

"I didn't say that," Striking Eagle returned. "Thar's several onpleasant features about the thing. She's with her father. Then her mother-in-law's got her now, and this medlin' among wimmin is a bad play."

"But the thought of forcing her to marry a miserable renegade, or an Indian, when she so much abhors them both," Will put in.

"Thar's whar ye hev me," the scout exclaimed, vigorously. "If thar's any parson on airth I despise, it's a miserable runnygade. Arter all white folks has suffered from the red critters, tew hev some men of our own color come out and jine hands with 'em is jest a little more nor I kin stand. But, afore we talk that thing over further, here is suthin' to think of."

He proceeded to pull off various articles of clothing from the bodies of the fallen savages, and when he had finished he said:

"The fust thing to dew is to make an Injin of yerself. Of course ye won't pass a clus examination, but a little ways off nobody can tell. Jest tuck yer cap intew yer clo'es, somehow, and try one of mine."

While speaking he produced two caps, so made as to imitate very closely, at a little distance, the scalp-lock of a

Dacotah. These he fitted upon himself and companion very carefully, and when a few changes had been made in their clothing, he said :

"Run out yender eight or ten rods, and see how good a looking red-skin I am."

The youth did as requested, feeling so much interested in the new part he was playing as almost to forget the bloody drama in which he was an actor. Wheeling at about the required distance, he looked around for his new-found friend, but did not at first see him. Then he noticed a scalp-lock protruding from behind a tree some distance away, and paused for a moment, uncertain whether it was really a savage, or Striking Eagle in his new costume.

He was not long kept in doubt, however, for, with an Indian whoop and yell, the ranger burst from his shelter, seeking one tree after another, until he was within speaking range.

"Youngster, ye make a purty good-lookin' red-skin," he exclaimed. "Wouldn't I do for a runnygade?"

"You'd do so well, that I was some in doubt whether it was you or not," Will answered.

"I'd do for one if he come in my way," the ranger growled between his teeth. "Let me set eyes on one of the rascals, and see what the result will be!"

Will ventured to express a wish to be under way, and as the scout cared not, so that his chances for a brush with the Indians were improved, they made preparations to resume their efforts in behalf of the unhappy girl.

It was found that Will's rifle had been appropriated by one of the Indians, who had been minus a gun. When it had been recovered, and both their powder-horns filled, the young man remarked :

"I've some cold venison in the cavern. Perhaps we had better take it with us, and lunch when we need it."

"Jes' so ; yer head is level, anyhow. At the same time I'd pick up all these fightin' traps and hide 'em somewhar, so that if we *should* want ter we can find 'em ag'in."

It was but a few minutes' work to gather up the weapons, and take them back to the cavern, where they were securely hid away. Then the broiled meat, which Will had thought

fully prepared for Esther, was divided, and this done, they were ready to set forth.

Striking Eagle, from his abundant experience, at once proposed a plan of action, which was agreed to by Will, and then they hastened toward Carroll's at a rapid pace, to put their plan in operation.

They had passed the deserted Indian village, and were so near that their movements required a great deal of caution, when Striking Eagle, who was slightly in advance, uttered a low note of warning and glided behind some bushes.

Will joined him, at a signal, and then the scout pointed far through the forest in advance, saying, at the same time:

"That kinder disturbs our karkilations a little, I take it."

Will saw what the scout meant, and regarded it with perplexity.

CHAPTER X.

THA-MA-HOU'S LODGE.

A FEW sentences were exchanged by Tha-ma-hou and old Moll, in the Dacotah tongue, of which the maiden knew nothing. Then the young chief planted himself full in front of the woman, with an air of determination. Moll attempted to argue with him, or to appease his passions, but quite in vain. Whatever it was that had offended him, Esther saw that the offense was deep.

Finding that the medicine-woman was not disposed to yield, he grasped the girl by the arm, and pointed with his free hand toward the house of Carroll. The anger of Moll did not allow her longer to confine herself to the Dacotah language.

"The gal prefars Zeph, of the tew, I tell ye, and Zeph wants her jest as bad as you. Then Zeph had the promise, and he shall have the gal!"

"Zeph not have her," Tha-ma-hou growled back.

Then, employing his native tongue, he dwelt fully upon the wrong which had been done him, and the insult he had received from the renegade. He had been promised the hand

and person of the maiden, which was all the marriage ceremony required. He had gone to the paternal cabin for her, only to be mocked and told that she was given to Zeph, whose name in the Indian vernacular was "Spider-Legs." But the maiden fought like a brave; she fled, and his warriors and dog had found her, and brought her back. The dog was crippled—spoiled. The white maiden must make good his loss.

Tha-ma-hou had manifestly the advantage. He had an attendant brave who did not hesitate to obey his master's commands, and separate Esther from the hag.

"Go home, now," the chief said. "Pretty pale-face go with me."

"You can't have her," the hag almost screamed. "If you take her away I'll send all manner of sickness among ye; yer braves 'll die off like sheep!"

"If brave sick, medicine-woman must cure him, or burn up," the chief said, with a firmness equal to her own.

He took the maiden's arm, who was too helpless to resist, even had she cared to, and led her away toward the Thank-touwanna village, while Moll, finding herself without any redress, walked gloomily away toward her home.

The manner of the chief toward his captive was far from brutal. He supported her weary steps, and when his lodge was reached, provided her with a seat. Esther could but feel that his affection toward her was genuine; and, repulsive as the life seemed, she certainly preferred being made the victim of the Indian rather than of the renegade. Still the most favorable fate had a depth of horror which she shrunk from contemplating.

Food was placed before her, and she ate quite heartily, for her long fast had given her an abundant appetite, notwithstanding her complete exhaustion.

After she had eaten, a rude curtain of skins was formed across a portion of the lodge, and a couch of the same prepared behind it.

"You shall rest—sleep," the chief said, as he conducted her toward the place. "No Injun come here."

His manner was really kind, and she thanked him for the assurance that her rest should not be disturbed.

"Me keep Injun away," he said, with an air of pride.

As he turned away, and she was about to throw herself upon the couch, she beheld half of a knife upon the earth, and on picking it up saw that about an inch of the blade remained attached. Quickly thrusting it under the skins, with the thought that it might be of use, she dropped upon the couch, and in a few minutes was asleep.

It was dark when she awoke fully. She drew aside the bear-skin which secluded her from the outer lodge, and saw that deep twilight had settled over the earth.

An Indian girl, aroused by the movement, came quickly toward her, and asked if she would have food. Just what Esther wished most of all was placed before her, and then she was left to her own reflections.

She had determined on flight, but how could she leave the lodge? The village, consisting of some twenty lodges, was arranged about a common square or street. At the head of the street, and in the center, stood the lodge in which she was incarcerated, the doorway opening upon the street. At the distance of a hundred yards, exactly opposite, stood another, while the remainder were ranged upon either side, and between them. Her only course was to cut the lodge-skins and escape from the rear. This she resolved to do without delay.

Being very careful to make no noise, she cut a longitudinal slit in the skins some three feet in length, and then a transverse gash just below it, reaching from pole to pole.

She was quickly outside, and seeing no person in sight, she fled as rapidly as her limbs could carry her toward the forest, only a few paces distant.

She had gained the shelter of the trees, and slackened her pace somewhat, that she might move more silently, when a tall form sprung from behind a tree, and almost before she was aware of it, she found herself struggling in the arms of a powerful man, whose hand was instantly placed over her mouth.

"Keep perfectly quiet. I'm yer friend," was whispered in her ear.

As he spoke, the scout slid her to the earth, and led her deeper into the forest.

They had not traveled very far when a sharp "hiss"

wounded, directly in front of them. Esther gave a start, and her companion at once answered it with a like signal, when a dark form glided up, and, in cautious tones, asked:

"Esther, is that you?"

Surely, only one person on earth ever spoke in those hesitating, nervous tones!

"Will Wilder, is it possible?" she gasped.

"Yes, Esther; you expected me dead, didn't you? *Did you care much?*"

He had taken her hand, and led her a little aside while he asked the question, bending low over her.

"Will, 'tis the happiest moment of my life, to find you alive!" was all the answer she could make, and it should have been answer enough.

"You can thank my noble friend here, for saving my life," he added, drawing nearer to Striking Eagle once more.

"I'm sure I do thank him very much," she said, pressing his hand again.

Will related to her briefly what had transpired.

"Very likely you heard yer father, Dennison, speak of the 'Striking Eagle,' a great Indian-hunter," he said, in closing.

"Oh, yes," was the quick reply, "I have often heard him wonder if there were such a man. He hardly thought it possible."

"It was possible, for this is he!"

"I am sure that I am safe, now," Esther said, ardently.

"Who would have supposed that I could have been so fortunate?"

"We must be movin' now; so no more talk," said the scout. "I'll go on ahead, and you and the gal keep as nigh tew me as ye kin. Ye want tew tread mighty keerful."

He led the way, and the two young people followed. Possibly they had gone two miles, when Striking Eagle suddenly paused, and uttered a low note of warning.

He bent his ear close to the earth, and listened. Presently he raised his head, and said, impressively:

"The cusses are trackin' us!"

A momentary silence followed.

"What shall we do?" Will asked.

"We'll have to either fight 'em, or else kill the dogs and

try to get away. I'll go back and see. Go ahead till ye git near the creek, then stop and wait for me. Signals as before."

The yelping and bounding of the disciplined dogs could now be plainly heard, and also the movements of the accompanying Indians.

As he spoke, Striking Eagle bounded away like a fleet hadow, and was lost to the view of his companions in a moment.

They turned and slowly pursued the designated route, as they could not move more than half as rapidly now that their leader was gone, and by no means as silently.

CHAPTER XI.

WON AND LOST.

THE creek was not far away, and they soon came as near to it as they dared go. That a crisis was at hand they well knew, though what the result would be, they had no means of judging. Here, standing close beside a rock, that no enemy might by chance observe them, they waited the return of their absent friend.

In a few moments his steps were heard, but so light were his movements that he was almost upon them before they were aware of his presence.

Will promptly gave the sharp "hiss"; it was immediately answered by Striking Eagle, who glided in beside them.

"Well?"

"I can make out not more than four or five. If you're afeard I'll take them alone."

"I am not afraid," returned Will, in a half-offended manner.

"I should have said afeard to leave the gal," the scout apologized. "Perhaps you'd better stay with her, while I settle their hash."

"I'm not afraid to stay alone," Esther returned, quickly.

"If I had a gun I'd do my share of the fighting, for I can shoot a rifle with any man."

"I'll try you some day," was the quick reply. "You are pure grit, anyhow. Come back here, beyond this rock, and don't move on any account till we come to you. It won't be a three minutes' job."

He led the maiden to the spot designated, then hastened to join Will. They had just time to place themselves in position, when the Indians came hurrying along, scarcely yet discernible through the intense darkness.

"Take the man square in front of ye," remarked the Eagle, cocking both barrels of his own piece. "Don't fire till ye are perfectly sure of 'em."

There were five forms, discernible through the darkness, close upon the two defenders, when the first shot was fired. A second and a third followed, and each spoke the fall of a brave. Will, who had not recovered his own pistols, had one belonging to his companion, and with it he fired at one of the remaining savages. The ball, striking some unseen object between them, glanced aside without accomplishing its mission, and the next instant the savage sprung upon the young man.

Will's position had been revealed by the flash of the pistol, and the Indian aimed a murderous blow at his head. Acting from impulse, the young scout had sprung forward, on seeing that his bullet missed its mark, and the movement saved his life. The Indian's arm struck his head, partially knocking him down, but sending the hatchet glancing away through the forest.

The savage had now no weapon in his hands, while Will retained the rifle he had clubbed. Quick as he could gather himself up, the white man aimed a furious blow at the red-skin. But the latter was only half defined in the darkness, and warded the blow, grasping his antagonist at the same moment.

Will was no infant in bodily powers, as the savage soon found to his cost. A lucky chance favored the white man, too, for while they were struggling, the Indian struck his heel against some obstacle, and fell to the ground. Will's knife was sheathed in the body of his foe in an instant, and then he turned to look for Striking Eagle.

That personage was in his glory. For his chief delight was now the destruction of the red-men. As we said, when the first shot was fired, the Indians were close to the white men, and closer to Striking Eagle than to his companion. The contents of the scout's second barrel struck down an antagonist almost at the muzzle of the gun. The flash of the discharge revealed clearly the position of the riflemen, and the third Indian, not taking time to use his gun, sprung bodily upon the scout, and endeavored to bear him to the earth.

Not one man in ten thousand but would have been borne down by the shock. Even Striking Eagle was staggered for a moment. But he resisted the onset, and attempted to throw the savage to the earth. In this he was not successful. The Indian clung close to the trapper with one hand, while with the other he seemed fumbling for a weapon.

"Ye can't come that," the scout cried, grasping his arms, and holding his hands aloft. "The red-skin what could get the best of me hain't been born yit. No, nor ever will be, either."

The savage uttered an exclamation of contempt as he replied:

"Who you? Me Tha-ma-hou, great chief of Thanktouwannas!"

"Who am I?" hissed the scout. "You know me—I am the *Striking Eagle*!"

"Ah, Striking Eagle," the chief returned. "You kill many braves—now me hang your scalp in my lodge; make Tha-ma-hou proud!"

"Guess 'twill when yer hang it there!" the scout returned. "Ha! yer goin' to run, ye coward?"

The last exclamation was evoked by a very singular and unlooked-for move. Suddenly breaking from the scout's grasp, the chief bounded away through the woods, uttering a tantalizing laugh as the darkness covered his dusky form.

Striking Eagle immediately drew a pistol and fired, but the shot was entirely at a venture, and missed its mark. Again the mocking laugh as the flying chief shouted:

"Me come again, Striking Eagle!"

"I'm sorry he got away," the scout remarked. "I intended to have finished him, but he's gone. It's worth suthin' to

know he was skeert out when Striking Eagle had told of him !”

The speaker uttered a low laugh, and then stooped to examine the fallen.

“ They’re all done for beyend a doubt,” he said. “ I don’t want tew leave any of the cusses alive.”

Meantime Will had moved toward the spot where he supposed Esther to be, calling her name as he advanced. To his astonishment he received no response.

“ Esther—Esther !” he repeated, moving carefully back and forth, and listening in vain for an answer.

“ What’s up ?” demanded Striking Eagle. “ Has the gal gone ?”

“ I’m afraid so,” the young man returned, too much agitated to speak calmly. “ Where did you leave her ? Look and see !”

The scout hastened to the spot where he had left his charge, and found that she was really gone ! For a moment he stood perplexed, and then bent down to a close survey of the ground.

“ Thar’s tracks of moccasined feet here, as sure as ye live,” he exclaimed. “ I see how it was, I think. Some of the devils what we didn’t know about must hev got around the back side of us, and took her off. But, that don’t matter any great. I’ve been in wuss places nor that and found my way out ag’in, all right. We’ll look around here a bit, and then if we don’t find her we’ll heave straight for the Injin town.”

A very short search served to thoroughly convince them both that Esther could not be in the vicinity. Satisfied upon this point they turned, and made their way as rapidly as possible to the Indian town.

They reached its vicinity without adventure, but no signs of life were there. Striking Eagle having arranged his disguise so that it might be as nearly perfect as possible, moved carelessly down to the vicinity of the chief’s lodge, where he listened some time, till he had satisfied himself that Thamahou had not yet come in.

Here the recklessness of the man asserted itself in an unusual manner. He found the opening through which Esther had escaped, and soon satisfied himself that no person was in

the couch. Then he crept in, very slowly and noiselessly, and concealed himself to await the moment when the chief should enter with his prize.

He had scarcely composed himself when he heard a growl in the outer portion of the lodge, and on looking out saw that Tha-ma-hou had returned, though he came alone.

This was something of a disappointment to the old scout. He had hoped that the chief once more held possession of the maiden, since nothing would have pleased him more than a rescue from the very lodge in which he was standing.

Now he knew that Esther must be looked for elsewhere, though *where* was the question. The chief, too, seemed very angry, and only remained inside the lodge a moment. Stepping outside he gave the war-cry of the tribe, in obedience to which, half-sleeping and hastily-armed braves came pouring forth in profusion.

Just now decidedly the safest course for Striking Eagle was to remain inside the lodge. But that reckless man would have scorned the idea of safety, as connected with himself. He knew that Will would be anxious on his account, and, indeed, he knew not but harm had come to the young man.

Creeping from the lodge he glided back stealthily to the spot where he had left the young man, and was much relieved to find him still there.

"Have you seen any thing?" he asked.

"Nothing," Will replied, "save that the young chief went in, and I was afraid when the whoop was given that you were in danger."

"Never fear for me," returned the old scout, impressively. "I was in the chief's lodge when he came, and was more than disappointed that he did not bring the gal with him. I had things all arranged, but no matter. I can't imagine what he is goin' to dew with that party. Yender they go!"

Through the pale starlight the dim forms of some twenty or more warriors could be seen, creeping away into the forest, and heading toward the scene of the late encounter. They moved past the hiding scouts, so near that their footsteps could be plainly heard, and their numbers almost determined. When they had passed, Striking Eagle said, in a low whisper:

"I see now. They are goin' back to hunt us up. That

shows how much of a fighter that chief thinks me. Now it would be rare fun to burn up their town, and cut off what few he's left here, when they git well out of the way. I've done as bad capers, but jest now we want tew find the gal wust of all. I can't think of but one place more, can you?"

"Do you mean the cabin where her father lives?"

"I dew. It's jest possible she may hev got back there by some means, and as the young man you tell about may be thar, I think we'd better look arter her. What say?"

"By all means!" cried Will.

The thought that Zeph, whose repulsive form seemed even now present before him, should have Esther again in his power, excited the young man to an unusual degree. He could scarcely restrain his impatience, even while they proceeded as rapidly as was consistent with due caution.

The distance was not long, and in a short time they had crept unperceived to the rear of the building.

CHAPTER XII.

"WHY DON'T HE COME?"

ESTHER remained behind the rock where Striking Eagle had placed her, and heard the dreadful sounds of conflict so near to her. She knew by the struggle which followed the first shots that the whites had not won an immediate victory.

So intense became her interest, as the struggle proceeded, that she could not refrain from rising and peering over the rock, hoping to observe something of the progress of the conflict. She could see nothing, however, and sunk back with a sigh of anxiety.

Just at that moment a hand was placed over her mouth, an arm thrown around her, and she was dragged from the spot, a voice whispering in her ear as the movement was made:

"Don't make any noise. Come quick, or 'twill be too late!"

In the excitement of the moment one can well imagine

that Esther would not pause to scan the features of her companion, especially as a third party joined them, and assisted to drag her from the spot.

When they had proceeded a few steps, the one who had joined her last bent down and whispered:

"No noise; if ye do the Injins 'll hev us! It's me, Esther."

She recognized Carroll's voice, and a slight cry broke from her lips. Zeph, the detested, had been her captor!

Instantly a rough hand was laid over her mouth with more violence than was necessary, and a sharp voice hissed in her ear:

'Sh—girl! do you want the Injins to hev ye?" Then in a calmer tone, "If ye go to makin' any noise, I'll let 'em hev ye, acause I've been troubled with yer wayward freaks long enuff. I know how 'tis—they want ye for the torter, but I'm detarmined they shan't hev ye, if I hev to fight you and them both!"

So confused was she by the varied occurrences that she scarcely knew what to do or think. She supposed her friends must be overpowered, from the manner in which her father spoke. And then she had attempted escape so many times, and failed, and her father's professions of friendship had now such an air of sincerity, that she could only plead that he would not deceive her more; that he would, according to his promise, save her from the fury of the Indians, which she knew must be greatly aroused.

"You take keer of Esther," Zeph said, presently, "while I slip back and see how the fight goes. Thar ain't any hope for the white men, though."

He left them, and glided back, while Esther would have hoped, had she dared to hope any thing, that she might never see his face again.

The maiden and her father continued their journey, walking as fast as Esther could toil over the ground. She was suffering from over-exertion, and longed for rest; but would rest ever come to her?

They reached the house at length, and entered it, Carroll pushing the maiden in ahead of him. The same lamp was dimly burning upon the table, and beside it the old hag was

seated. She bounded up, however, when the girl entered, and sprung to meet her.

"Ah-ha, ye've come back, hev ye?" she screamed. "I'll make it warm for ye—I'll pay ye for the long tramp ye took me, and all I've suffered on your account. I knew my time would come!"

She produced a heavy stick, and would have given the poor girl a terrible beating had not Carroll interfered.

"Stop, Moll," he said. "The gal is tired, and needs rest. Lay up your whippings till to-morrow."

"Indeed I shan't do any thing of the kind! I'm goin' to pay her off now; to-morrer is a mighty onsartin day in this place."

"And I tell you it shan't be done now. Come here while I tell ye."

He whispered earnestly to the old hag for a few moments, and then the latter remarked:

"Take yerself intew yer room, then, till Zeph comes, for I don't want to see yer wax face around here any longer."

The poor girl obeyed the not very gracious request, only too glad to escape that fearful presence. Once having gained her apartment, or apology for one, the poor persecuted child threw herself upon the couch, and buried her face in the skins which served the place of pillows.

"Till Zeph comes!"

Oh, how those words rung in her memory, and burned in her brain!

She listened, every moment expecting to hear the dreaded footfall, but it was not heard. She had been spared much longer than she could have dared to hope.

With rest she became somewhat more composed, and considered what she should do next.

She had no weapons with which to defend herself; but stay—there was her rifle!

She rose quietly and took it down. She had supposed it loaded, but on examination she found that such was not the case. Nor was there any ammunition in the room. Little matter. She placed the weapon beside her couch, and then smiled, as she reflected that a single blow would rid her of one persecutor forever! But a moment later her soul recoiled

from deliberate murder, and with a sigh she returned the weapon to its rest.

"I can't imagine why Zeph don't come," Carroll growled, as he moved up and down the uneven room. "I s'posed he'd overtake us afore we got home, and he don't come yit."

He opened the door and looked out, listening attentively, but no signs of the absent one. He closed the door, carelessly, and returned to the fire-place.

A step sounded at the door, and a hand was laid upon the latch. The renegade started.

"There, he's come at last," he exclaimed, as the door was opened.

Carroll moved back a pace, and reached for his rifle.

It was not Zeph who entered!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HYENA AND PANTHER.

WHERE was Zeph?

Let us go back and see why he didn't come.

Tha-ma-hou fled from the presence of Striking Eagle simply because he intended to mislead the white men as to his intentions, and then steal back upon them. With this object in view, his footfalls were unusually heavy till he was some distance away, and then he turned and stole back.

Presently he heard footsteps coming in his direction, and that no chance might betray his presence, he drew a knife, and stepped behind a large tree that was near. Here he listened again, and had the satisfaction of hearing the white man come directly toward his hiding-place. Indeed, the not very cautious person passed within a yard of where he was standing.

It needed but a single glance to assure Tha-ma-hou that this person was Zeph, or Spider-Legs, as he was called by the Indians. In an instant, thoughts of treachery passed across the Indian's mind. Zeph was his rival for the possession of the maiden, and the chief had no confidence in his honor.

The more he thought the more he believed Spider-Legs to have been one of the principals, and one of those who had assisted in slaying his followers.

Placing his knife between his teeth, he bounded out, grasped the young renegade by the throat, and hurled him to the earth. Then placing one knee upon his breast, and brandishing his knife, the chief said:

"Die, dog of a pale-face!"

"Mercy!" gasped the prostrate man. "What do you mean, Tha-ma-hou? I am your friend—always was your friend. I came out here to help you!"

"To help my braves die!" retorted the young chief, using his own language, which the other understood very well. "No, Spider-Legs, your time has come. Die now. I will not waste words here."

Zeph saw that the Indian meant to kill him, consequently there was but one thing for him to do, that was, fight back if he could. He moved a hand carefully to one of his pistols, and was on the point of drawing it, when Tha-ma-hou detected the movement.

Quicker almost than thought the keen knife was drawn across his victim's neck. There was a sharp cry, a terrible, convulsive spring, as the steel severed the shrinking flesh, and then the life-blood gushed forth in furious torrents.

The young chief rose to his feet, and watched calmly till the last struggles ceased, and then spurned the still-reeking body with his foot. For a moment he bent his head in meditation, then hastened back to his village.

And this was why Zeph came not to consummate his fiendish scheme.

CHAPTER XIV

THE AVENGER.

STRIKING EAGLE led the way, controlling the movements of his companion by signals, which Will had no difficulty in following.

A pale gleam of light shot from the interior of the building, falling upon the ground. Of course it must pass through some chink in the walls, and the scout was not long in finding the spot. Drawing Will close to him, he whispered:

"Keep a sharp watch, while I see what is going on inside."

From their conversation the scout soon gathered that Zeph had not returned, and that Esther was somewhere in the building, which facts he communicated to Will.

That individual was highly excited in a moment.

"Let's go in and rescue her," he exclaimed. "When Zeph comes it may be too late!"

"Not yet," returned the scout. "You know she is under her father's roof, whar we've no right to interfere, save in a case of extremity. Besides, I've a fancy I know this feller, and if so, I've an old score, of many years' standin' to settle with him. Keep up your look-out a few minutes; you know I kin be trusted in a tight place."

The young man felt the rebuke, and whispered:

"All right; you know best. But by no means let any harm come to the poor girl."

They resumed their positions, and in a few moments Striking Eagle exclaimed:

"I know him. 'Tis the one! My hour of vengeance has come! I know the man now, and I thank God I find him at last! How strange I talk! Am I going mad?"

They moved around toward the door, and when they reached it the scout remarked:

"Keep yer weepins in readiness, but don't use 'em onless in case of need. You will know why I act so strangely some time."

The door was opened, for it had not been barred, and Striking Eagle and the renegade confronted each other. The latter made a motion toward his rifle, but the scout produced a pistol, full cocked, which he leveled at the other's head.

"Don't ye move another step, Sim Sampson," he exclaimed, sternly; "if you do, you die!"

The appearance of the scout would have struck terror to the strongest heart. His eyes fairly blazed, and seemed in their stern scorn to penetrate the wretched renegade through and through. The latter stopped, trembled, and his hand fell listless to his side.

"Who are you? My name is Hank Carroll, and not Sampson."

"Hank Carroll!" hissed the scout. "Fool! do you think you can deceive me? *You know me, and I know you!* I've looked for you long years, and now I've found you! I've been whar no white man but me would have dared go if he wished to live, and at last I've found you! Now our old score shall all be paid off!"

"If yer think ye ever seen me afore yer much mistaken," the latter said, though his extreme pallor and agitation gave the lie to his words.

"Sim Sampson, do ye dare tell me any thing of that kind, when yer soul is so near etarnity?" the scout demanded, fiercely. "Stop, ye needn't make any motions, nor try to git out a pistol, for thar's no power on airth can save yer life now. I want yer to stop and think back twenty years. I want yer to remember how ye tried to court a sartin young lady, and she wouldn't hev any thing to say to yer. She wouldn't acause she loved me, and had promised to marry me. *She did marry me!*"

Here the speaker's voice became yet more deep and terrible in tone, as he proceeded:

"Then ye come to my house, when ye knew I was away, and tried by persuasion and insult to make my home miserable! That woman drove ye out, sneaking runnygade, and would hev killed ye if ye'd ever come that way ag'in. What did you do? Watched yer chance, and four years arter, when the Injins riz, partly through your persuasions, I've no doubt, and my little family was driven forth, your friends butchered

my wife and children, and I barely escaped the same fate! You had your revenge then, on a brave woman who dared defend her honor! Now *my* time has come! I've been a heartless, reckless man from that time. My whole life has been one continued campaign against the infarnal brutes that did your bidding. If one has paid for the dark job, hundreds have helped him! It made no difference to me what else he might be; if he was an Injin, that fact cost him his life, if I could reach him. You supposed me dead, without doubt. You did not think that Striking Eagle might be the man you had wronged so terribly!"

The renegade was certainly abashed somewhat by the very determined manner of the man who confronted him, but he managed to reply:

"I did know ye, Abe Dennison, because I seen yer once, and found the Strikin' Eagle was nobody but my old friend. But, ye hadn't orter blame me so much. I couldn't hold the Injins back; I tried."

"'Tis a lie!" thundered the scout, while his features worked with terrible passion. "You led them yourself—led a small party on, far in advance of the main body, and only that *my* family might be reached."

"No, no; yer mistaken in that," the renegade insisted. "I didn't dew it. Ye don't need to kill me, acause that won't bring back the lost. Ye've had yer revenge, if ever any man on airth did. I'm sorry for what I did, and these many year I've been here, tryin' to live a decent, quiet life. I can't go back among white folks, acause—"

"'Tis all a lie!" the scout broke in. "Now is yer time to own up, if thar's any thing ye want tew confess, for jest when I've counted twenty, I shall fire!"

The wretch glared around the apartment, glancing at the pistol in the scout's hand, which never moved a hair from its perfect aim, then at the dark features of the man who held it then at the young man, who, silent and stern, stood beside the door, too much interested in the drama transpiring before him to think of aught save his duty and the strange scene

Meantime the ranger had commenced to count slowly:

"One—two—three—four—five—six—seven—eight—nine—~~ten~~—eleven—twelve—thirteen—fourteen—fifteen—"

At that moment, Esther, who had been a deeply-interested listener to all that had transpired, moved aside the buffalo-skin which covered the entrance to her room, and looked forth.

"Wait, Abe Dennison," the doomed man cried, as he saw the movement; "*there* is one of your family; she was not killed!"

It was certainly strange that a scout of Striking Eagle's experience should be taken off his guard, but it was a fact, nevertheless, that when Carroll uttered the words just given, the scout turned his eyes for a moment in the direction of Esther.

That moment came near being his last. But for a singular coincidence such would have been the case.

Carroll had brought his hand near a concealed pistol, and when the scout turned his head, pulled it quickly forth and fired. The ball took fatal effect, but not as had been intended.

Moll had been watching the scene with great interest, and when Striking Eagle removed his burning eyes from her confederate for an instant, she gave a great spring forward to seize the hand which held the threatening pistol.

She was just in time to receive in her own brain the bullet which had been intended to perform a similar office for Striking Eagle. Without a groan or gasp, she pitched headlong upon the floor, dead, her brains scattered over the wretched man who had ended her existence.

The renegade recoiled on seeing the work of his hands, but it was his last earthly act. The scout stepped forward a pace, and putting his pistol close to Carroll's breast, pulled the trigger. The victim uttered a low cry, and fell to the floor.

"You've done it, after all!" he gasped forth.

The avenger tore away the clothing, and looked at the wound.

"I've given ye that for *her* sake," he said, calmly, "and for the sweet children's sake. You killed them all—it was all *your* doin's, and you know this is less than you deserve."

"No, Abe, I didn't kill 'em all—one, the oldest, is alive—"

He paused, for his throat was filling with blood and when

he had remained silent a short time the scout, fearing he would never speak again, asked :

"Where, if alive, where is she?"

A terrible groan burst from the sufferer's lips, and he gasped with agony.

"Devils!" he cried, wildly, "I can not die; I am not ready; you shall not torment me yet!"

Then, after another interval of silence, he continued brokenly :

"Yis, she lives, but you never can know whar! Thar ain't ye glad ye've found out? Devils, we'll be too much for 'em, arter all! No, he can't find her, alone."

Then followed a shriek of mortal agony, a struggle, a bursting of blood from the mouth and nose, and all was over with the heartless renegade.

CHAPTER XV.

INTO LIGHT.

THE scout turned toward the horror-stricken maid, and when his eyes rested upon her features he started, then stepped forward and grasped her arm in a manner almost painful to the maiden.

"Gal," he said, rather excitedly, "if ye warn't flesh and blood I should have said ye was the ghost of my murdered wife. Who are you? It may be he spoke the truth."

"My name is Esther Dennison," the maiden began, but the scout interrupted her—

"Esther *Dennison*?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir, from my foster-father, Dennison, the Black-Hawk Scout."

And then she proceeded to tell him in as few words as possible, how she had been rescued from the Indians when only three years old, how she had lived happily with her preserver during all the years until Carroll came and **claimed her**, and brought her away into that place.

Other links in the chain he had gathered from Will, and when the maiden's story was completed he said:

"My girl! as God lives, I believe I've found one of my children, at last. Do you think you would wish to be my little—no, you're a *large* girl now—but do you think you could ever be satisfied to call *me* FATHER?"

His looks were very different now from what they were a few minutes before, when he had glared destruction upon the false-hearted renegade. A pleasant smile lighted up his features, and a world of affection gleamed in his dark eyes. But Esther did not need to regard these features closely. She had but faith in and love for the man whose name was a terror to entire tribes of savages, for the dash of wildness in her own composition fitted her to appreciate just such men, if their hearts were right, and that such was the case with the daring scout, she knew very well. So she did not hesitate, but replied at once:

"I should be happy, indeed, to own you for a father, if—if you could know that you *were* my father."

"I am almost sure of it, gal. In the first place you resemble your mother—as I suppose—very closely. Then your age is right, exactly, the fact of your being taken from the Indians, all coincides with the particulars of my little Cora, that I have supposed dead so long. Then, also, the very fact that Sim Sampson, or Carroll, as he called himself, brought you here seems to me another confirmation. As fer yer bein' called *Dennison*, that's yer right name, if you are my gal, because my name was Abraham Dennison when I was among white folks. The scout ye speak of is my only brother. But he grew up and went off afore I got any size, and from that day to this I never have seen him."

"It must be that I am your daughter," Esther said, taking the scout's hand, and gazing into his eyes. "You will let me call you father, will you not?—and then I shall feel that I have somebody to take care of me."

"Ain't *this* somebody to take care of you?" Dennison asked, nodding toward Will.

"Well—not a—not a *father*!" the maiden stammered.

"No, not a father, as you say; but let me tell you, gal, ~~there's~~ mighty few fathers that would have run the reeks in

your behalf what this young man has. And he's a green hand to the woods, tew. But the resks ain't all over with, I take notice."

"No, indeed," said Will. "We must get out of this, now. How are we going?"

"Wal, thar's a question. You and I could walk well enough, but Esther—*my Esther*—can't do any more of that, especially not two hundred miles to a pull. I don't suppose thar's any hosses tew be had."

"Yes, indeed," said Esther. "Around to the west of the Indian town are several horses, and only one guard is kept over them usually. We may succeed in getting some of them."

"We *will* succeed!" the scout exclaimed, and turned toward the door. "We don't need tew stay here any longer, dew we?"

"Oh yes, my rifle!" cried Esther. "We may want to fight before getting home, and I shall want to be counted in."

She quickly procured the weapon, and while she was engaged in loading it her companions had ample time to put their own arms in order.

This done they left the building, with its stark and bloody occupants, and proceeded to the inclosure containing the horses. They were not guarded, or if so the sentry was in some snug corner asleep, and our heroic party had no difficulty in obtaining three hardy animals, which they led away.

A bear-skin which the scout had brought along supplied in some measure the place of a saddle on Esther's animal, some cords were readily made into halters which indifferently took the place of bridles, and when these preliminaries had been attended to the party mounted and set forth.

"We can't kiver the trail," Striking Eagle said, "but we shall hev till mornin' the start of 'em, and if they catch us then the worst will be their own. They shan't never have my Esther any more!"

"I'm agreed to that," said Will.

"And I, too," said the maiden. "I am the daughter of a fighting father, and if the chance comes I'll show him that I'm not unworthy the honor."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE HAVEN AFTER THE STORM.

WHEN morning broke the party had made good progress, under Striking Eagle. That person, understanding well the nature of the ground, hilly regions, and water-courses, was able to take them by an unfrequented route, frequently blind and dangerous in appearance, which would require a most careful investigation to follow. Hence they had little fear of an immediate, successful pursuit.

After daylight came Will shot a bear, the carcass of which they left, merely cutting out such portions of the meat as they wished to use. On reaching the nearest creek they dismounted, kindled a fire, and cooked the meat, while the horses cropped the grass which sprouted in many places along the banks, and drank from the clear water.

An hour was all the time they dared devote to rest now, and when that was consumed they set forward again, this time taking a more open route, where they could bring out the best efforts of their horses.

At noon the pause they made was even shorter, and then they pushed on again till darkness came.

When they dismounted it was in a wild, dark glen, among unfrequented hills, where wild beasts prowled, and noisome serpents crept away before the approach of the intruders.

Here, if anywhere, they would be safe from the red-men. Still they must observe great caution, as they were in the midst of the Indian country, and roving bodies of savages might pass that way at any moment.

"Ye see," remarked the scout, after he had explained the nature of the situation, "one of us must keep watch all the while. Thar mustn't be any resks run. If we git through to-night, seems to me we shall be tolerably safe. We are now a good hundred miles from the red-skins' head-quarters, and another day will put us clear out of their reckonin'. You kin go on fust, if yer a mind tew, and I'll git supper and sech lika."

The arrangement was agreed to. Will took his post, and then Esther was persuaded to lie down and rest while the evening repast was prepared.

When the bear-steak was broiled the fire was carefully extinguished, the meat eaten in silence, and then a profound hush came over the camp.

Will Wilder felt the responsibility of his situation. He was so stationed that neither himself, the scout, or Esther could be approached by any intruder without his knowledge. The horses were near at hand, and a few steps from his general position would enable him to see that they were safe.

The night was wearing on—the star which he was to watch to a certain point had nearly reached it, and he would soon have to call up his companion, and endeavor to snatch a few hours of sleep himself. Suddenly he seemed to hear the movement of horses! Glancing in that direction, he was surprised to find that the three animals had been led away! He could hear them moving still, but they were quite out of sight in the darkness. He hastened at once to arouse the scout.

“Our horses are stolen!” he whispered, in startled tones.

“Just now?”

“Just this moment.”

“All right, thar’ll be more Injin blood spilt. Wake the gal up quick, and take her right across here, under that ledge.”

“That’s the very way the horses went.”

“That’s what I want.”

The maiden was quickly awakened. Holding their weapons in readiness for immediate service, the party moved away, and took up their stations under an overhanging rock.

Within five minutes the stealthy movements of returning savages were heard, and presently they glided by, almost within touching distance of the whites. There were four of them, following each other closely in Indian file.

“Pistols,” whispered the scout—“fire!”

Will and himself with pistols, and Esther with her rifle, aimed at the receding party, and fired. Two of them fell; the others started to fly.

Three sharp rifle-cracks quickly succeeded, Will firing a single shot and the scout discharging both barrels of his weapon. The flying savages fell before the deadly messengers.

But while the sharp reports still echoed through the forest, there came another shot, so close to the parties that the smoke almost drifted upon them.

The scout dropped his rifle, and staggered for a moment.

"Oh, my father!" Esther cried, in an agony of terror.

But the scout did not fall. He gathered himself, and then, with a terrible spring, seized his treacherous enemy.

Neither Esther nor Will could see the contestants for a time, but they could hear the sounds of a fierce struggle, and knew that Striking Eagle had found a formidable adversary.

Then the movements came nearer to them, and they felt that the scout was being forced back!

Very soon these fears were justified. Dennison appeared, slowly giving way before his antagonist, an Indian of powerful frame. A glance showed Esther that it was Tha-ma-hou!

Backward, step by step and foot by foot, the scout moved, to all appearance resisting, yet overborne. Suddenly his manner changed. One hand slid quickly from its place, and seized the red-skin's scalp-lock, bending his head back with a ferocious twist.

Evidently this was something quite unexpected, on the part of the savage. He struggled for a brief time, and then his efforts ceased. Striking Eagle's knife had found his heart!

As the Indian sunk to the ground with a low moan, the white man bent close to him, exclaiming:

"Ah, chief, you met the Striking Eagle once too much!"

As Dennison bent over the fallen brave, Esther grasped his arm, and in tender tones, asked:

"Are you much hurt, father?"

"How strange the name sounds," he mused. "No, I am not hurt at all, I guess not, for the Injin that could do that thing hain't breathed yet. But he gave me a close call, though."

He raised his rifle, and showed them where a bullet had struck the breech, plowing along in the wood, and finally glanced out, thus narrowly escaping his life.

"But never mind, he said, cheerily, "'a miss,' they say, 'is as good as a mile,' and better in this case, for then we might have had to look out for this young chief some other time; now we never shall!"

He turned over the lifeless body and then exclaimed:

"I think the hosses are fastened just yender; if they are, we'd better be goin', for some other red-skins may want to come here and sniff the burnt powder."

They moved away quietly in the direction taken by their enemies when conducting away the horses, and at the distance of two hundred yards found them securely fastened. It was but a moment's work to mount, and making a *détour* they rode from the spot.

For two hours they rode on steadily, and then stopped till early dawn. It was not thought best to build any fire, so they ate a trifle of cold meat, and resumed their way as soon as the rays of light began to penetrate the forest.

Owing to Dennison's perfect acquaintance with all the Indian haunts, they were enabled to avoid all those routes which would have led them into danger.

Finally the Indian range was declared passed, then scattered settlements began to meet their eyes as from elevated points they looked away where the smoke of settlers' cabins rose, and near the close of the third day they rode up toward old Dan Dennison's habitation.

All were rejoiced, but to none came sincerer happiness than to Esther. Will was proud, and the scarred scout felt that the perfect solution of an important enigma drew near.

Dan Dennison, still weak from his wound, came to meet them.

"Ah, my Esther," he said, "ye don't know what fears I had for ye! I was thinkin' of goin' out to-morrer and tryin' to find ye. But whom have we here?"

"That, father, is Striking Eagle, whom we have all heard so much about!"

"Striking Eagle! Well! well! Let me take yer hand, for if the tenth part I've hearn of ye is true, I want to make yer acquaintance."

"I guess we shall be acquainted, Dan," the scout said, as they clasped hands, "for I'm yer own brother, Abraham!"

"You don't—no—why, Abe *died*, as I heard."

"You didn't hear right, then, for I'm Abe, and I ain't dead yet."

The greeting between the brothers was cordial, but the younger cut it short.

"Dan," he said, "I think this dear girl that you rescued, and took such care of, is my child!"

"What is that? Wonder upon wonder!"

"I am almost satisfied, and you can tell me to a certainty. My child, when I supposed it killed, wore a sack of checked brown and red, with a belt of the same colors, striped. I remember that, from the peculiarity of the dress."

"You've said it exactly," cried Dan. "That's what the child had on, and I have 'em laid up now!"

"Then you are my dear father!" Esther cried, throwing her arms about the scout's neck, and kissing the small section of cheek which presented.

Then breaking away in a moment, she ran to Dan, down whose cheeks tears of happiness were rolling, and kissed him in turn, saying:

"It wasn't very wrong to call you my father, for you *are* my uncle, and that is almost as good. What a dear uncle and father I shall have!"

Here the details of our story end. A few general remarks, and our pleasant task is done.

Abe Dennison did not entirely forsake his wild scout life. But most of his years were passed with his brother, in his daughter's happy home, where, as Mrs. Will Wilder, she was beloved by all, and taught a fine family of young ideas how to *shoot*, in every sense of the word.

Dan Dennison never recovered entirely from the wound upon his head, though he lived several years beyond the allotted age of man.

Will Wilder proved a hero, as well as a noble citizen. When the war for the Union broke out, he responded with heart and hand. Entering the service in the modest capacity of sergeant, he rose steadily through all the grades, and now signs his official name GEN. WILL WILDER. But among all the pleasing memories of his life, the proudest is that of his **FIRST TRAIL.**

THE END.

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